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## Feature

### Enabling the blind to vote in Albania's national elections

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The national elections in Albania on 3 July 2005 marked a major step forward for the country's blind and partially-sighted: for the first time ever, they were able to exercise their constitutional right to vote in person.

Thanks to a nationwide project by the National Association of the Blind (NAB), supported by the OSCE Presence in Albania, all eligible blind people who chose to participate were able to cast their ballots in a transparent and effective manner.

The extraordinary interest shown by the blind in the process was reflected in the very high turnout of blind voters in the elections, which was estimated at around 80 per cent.

#### Equal democratic standards for all voters

"This has been a breakthrough in ensuring equal democratic standards for all voters, including people with disabilities, and in eliminating the barriers that prevent willing blind voters from participating in elections," said the Head of the OSCE Presence, Ambassador Pavel Vacek.

Positive action to promote the rights of the blind was long overdue in Albania, and it proved to be no easy task. The NAB therefore agreed to co-ordinate a national effort to enable all blind persons to vote.

There are 8,400 blind and visually-impaired people registered with the NAB as eligible to vote, but until now, the necessary preconditions to allow them to do so were not in place.

Enabling them to exercise this right required the engagement of civil society, constant support from international organizations, and a constructive stance from the Albanian Government.

The OSCE decided to join forces on the project with the Central Election Commission (CEC) and the NAB after the CEC and the Association signed an agreement on 11 May this year laying out their joint responsibilities with regard to elections.

#### Numerous training sessions

The NAB held numerous training sessions on the voting procedure for the blind in the 94 election zones (out of a total of 100) where they were registered to vote, and distributed 4,200 informational tapes and 200 sample ballot papers in Braille and high relief.

The NAB also printed input masks based on the format of the official CEC ballot paper for the 8,400 eligible blind voters and distributed them in all 94 electoral zones.

These input masks, which had special openings enabling blind people to identify parties and candidates by their corresponding numbers and to vote accordingly, were the main tool for enabling the blind and visually-impaired to cast their votes.

The idea behind the project was to ensure a significant improvement in the status and civic participation of the blind and visually-impaired in Albania. It was partially funded by the OSCE (35,488 euros) and the NAB (7,000 euros).

The specific aims of the project were:

- to ensure that the necessary conditions were fulfilled so that the visually-impaired could vote;
- to ensure that blind voters were informed about their opportunities to vote; and
- to ensure that the blind were in practice able to vote in the elections.

"Thanks to the support of the OSCE and the co-operation of the CEC, blind people were given the chance to cast their vote on a national level for the first time in Albania," said the head of the project, Ermir Kapedani.

"The success of the project lays the foundation for the sustainable participation of blind voters in the next national elections," he added.

In the longer term, the overarching goal is the full integration of the blind and visually-impaired into Albania's civic and political life.

*Written by Bernadett Csapo*

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A blind person reads election material in Braille, which was made available for the first time in Albania through an OSCE Presence-supported project that enabled the blind to vote in the elections on 3 July 2005. (OSCE/ Bernadett Csapo)

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Ambassador Pavel Vacek, Head of the OSCE Presence in Albania

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