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Aspects of political representation in Albania: is it time for fewer seats in parliament?

Abstract

The Constitution of the Republic of Albania sets down that the members of parliament must number 140, elected from multi-nominal electoral districts corresponding to the administrative division of the country and according to a proportional regional formula. In general, as elsewhere, the constitution does not reference the ratio between the number of members and the size of the population. However, members are representatives of the people and, as such, there is a direct relationship between the size of the population and the number of members of the representative body. This article starts from the idea that 25 years after the constitution's approval, it is time to reconsider the number of its members. The population is changing because of emigration and birth rates, and while emigrants are still part of electoral lists, the state has not given them the proper tools to exercise the right to vote. On the other hand, the proportional formula has created a lack of contact and confidence between representatives and the population. For this reason, the question addressed here is whether it is time to have fewer political representatives.

Keywords: *parliament, representatives, ratio of representation, seats in parliament, parliamentary reform, quality of debate, citizens' participation*

Introduction: issues in the Albanian Parliament

Like the rest of eastern Europe, Albania started the process of transition to democracy in 1991, after half a century of a dictatorship regime. In November 1998, following a national referendum, the first democratic constitution was approved, marking a significant step towards democratisation. The Albanian population is generally known for consistently supporting the country's integration into the European Union. Indeed, almost all political parties have integration as a mission, but only in 2014 did the country gain the status of candidate country and open the negotiation process.

Nevertheless, after thirty years of transition, the country still faces challenges with democracy, corruption, reform of public administration, etc. (Freedom House 2022). Based on the last Progress Report of the European Commission, Albania has, among other issues, still to solve problems with political representation, like the low participation of the electorate in the last elections (only 34%), vote-buying and the misuse of state resources. Another issue the report raises is the high levels of polarisation in parliament, where the rhetoric is harsh and discussions are mainly based on personal attacks (European Commission 2023). In almost every legislature,

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the opposition and majority parties' elites struggle to find common ground. Consequently, the opposition regularly chooses to boycott parliament's plenary sessions, thus stopping the process of daily decision-making, the progress of public policies and the advance of the country in its integration process with the EU. The boycott of the parliamentary plenary sessions has happened frequently, and in 1996 the opposition boycotted the elections (Krasniqi 1996) while the same thing happened in 2008, in 2014, in 2017 (Ora News 2014) and in 2019, when opposition parties took the radical decision to pull their representatives' mandates and ask for early elections (Ruçi 2019).

Such a parliamentary tactic is often used in the Balkan region and in other fragile democracies like Bangladesh where, according to Islami (2008), the political class, reflecting an old mentality, tries to create instability and, therefore, realise early elections because of the absence of the opposition. Even though this tactic never gains the support of the international community, the opposition continues to believe that this is the right way to achieve their aim of an early election.

On the other hand, continuing change in the electoral process does challenge parliamentary representation. The first pluralistic elections of 1991 were held under an absolute majority system with two rounds; from 1992 to 1995, there was a mixed formula with 100 deputies assigned according to a majority formula in 100 uni-nominal zones and 40 seats assigned by a formula of national proportional representation; in 1996 and 1997 a combined independent formula was applied and in 2009 there was regional proportional representation organised under the d'Hondt system (Ceka 2012). Çili (2013) argues that the electoral system was changed in almost every election prior to 2009, highlighting that this was done in compromise between the main political parties.

Regarding the party system, the political scene is dominated by two main parties, PD (Democratic Party) on the right and PS (Socialist Party) on the left, followed by a minor moderate left party, PL (Party of Liberty), which split from the PS in 2004 and which, up to 2022, was called LSI (Social Movement for Integration) (Xhaferaj 2014). However, other minor parties supplement the two main ones, such as PSD (Social Democratic Party) or PR (Republican Party). In addition, the political arena is dominated by prominent leaders who have been at the top of their parties for decades and are re-elected with mandate after mandate without having to face substantial competition. Therefore, the national or local electoral campaign is directed and served only by the figure of the leaders, with party structures not having any significant role. Moreover, the decision of the candidates and their positions on the party list is decided exclusively by the leaders (Krasniqi & Hackaj 2020).

These developments in the political system, characterised by a continuing change in the electoral formula at the will of the leaders, the disconnection of the electorate from the candidates as representatives, the absence of respect for the parties' own internal institutions and the centralisation of power in the hands of the leaders, have all had their toll in bringing about a disconnection between the people and their parliamentary representatives. Jano (2008), considering the old mentality of the leaderships and their provincialism, explains this in terms of the decreasing number

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of members of all parties and the reduced participation of the electorate in the elections.

Moreover, between 2009 and the present, there has been a decrease in the quality of members of parliament. Hence, a recent study on parliament's activity in 2022 has shown severe threats to the representative body such as personalised attacks, arrogant behaviour amidst accusations of denigratory language, weak parliamentary debate, an apparent positioning of deputies as subject to the personal interests of the leaders and an absence of transparency even in formal relevant processes such as the election of the president of the republic. Furthermore, 12% of deputies have not spoken in parliament even once, while only two or three deputies contribute to qualitative discourse in plenary sessions (Krasniqi et al. 2022). The poor quality is clearly perceived by the population, the majority of whom think that some deputies cannot articulate correctly and make mistakes even in simple sentences. People regard deputies as servants of their leaders and they do not feel any connection between themselves and those they elect to serve them (Nasto 2022).

Considering these issues about the quality of representation, this article considers whether Albania should consider constitutional reform to decrease the number of representatives in the legislative body. In particular, it focuses on the question of whether a decrease in the number would act to improve the quality of the representation.

Methodology

The methodology used to answer this question is based on three moments: a literature review, a historical number analysis of the representative body of Albania, and a comparative analysis between Albania and European Union countries regarding seats in parliament in relation to size of population.

First, the article undertakes a panorama of what the academic literature offers regarding the 'correct' number of representatives in relation to the population. It is relevant to note how the number of seats can be calculated in different cases.

Second, the article describes how the number of representatives in parliament has changed in the 111 years of the independent Albanian state. This step is essential in understanding how the number has changed in the different political phases of the country. In this way, it is understandable that a change in the number of representatives is not something that is either new or impossible to undertake.

Third, as Albania is a candidate country for the EU, the article analyses the number of seats in parliaments in member states of the European Union and the UK, and, at the same time, the representative ratio of the European Parliament. In this way, we can understand the trend ratio within the EU. At the same time, the article reviews in this section how some EU states are considering reforming the representative body by changing the number of seats, or indeed have already done so. Likewise, it seeks to show the reasons behind these trends.

Ultimately, the article emerges with some argued conclusions on what we can expect if the number of representatives decreases in the Albanian Parliament and

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finally establishes an answer to the research question of whether it be a good idea to change the number of seats in it.

Literature review

UNDP (2012: 92) highlights that there are legislatures of considerably different dimensions in the world: the largest parliament is in China, with nearly 3000 members, while the smallest is in Micronesia, which has only 14. The average parliament consists of about 250 members. Parliaments are crucial for the functioning of democracies. Indeed, there is no democracy without parliament; but the contrary is also true – there are parliaments without democracy.

Most scholars agree that the legislative body is essential as it is the core of democratic decision-making and represents the sovereignty of the people. Even though there is no theoretical idea of the 'perfect' number of people's representatives, the size of the parliament affects the way it works, especially regarding the decision-making process and its communication with the groups and interests comprising the population.

However, some authors like Taagepera (1973) or Auriol and Gary-Bobo (2012) claim that, based on in-depth studies of multiple countries, the optimal number of representatives in parliament is proportional to either the cube or the square root of the total population. In their study, which takes into consideration 100 countries, Auriol and Gary-Bobo argue that a small parliament is not representative, but a big parliament often has problems of corruption.

For the European Parliament, it was previously the case that each country's share of the seats was a constant ratio to its population (Johnson 1983), with the number of seats calculated periodically before elections (Balinsky and Young 1982). Nevertheless, comparing the most prominent countries with the smallest ones, like the Netherlands, Portugal, etc., it seems fair to give small countries the possibility of having a more significant ratio of representation and, indeed, this is now the case under the principle of degressive proportionality (European Parliament 2018). Indeed, Article 14 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (2012) states that the size of the parliament should be proportional to the population but that the total number should not exceed 750 members and that no country should have fewer than six members or more than 96.

The Electoral Knowledge Network suggests that the optimal size of a parliament should be the cube root of the population. However, it also suggests that other parameters are essential for developing countries in calculating a suitable number of parliament members. Therefore, the number of the active population, which means the population that can form the electorate, as well as the literacy rate and working age, are meaningful factors in calculating the right size of the parliament (Electoral Knowledge Network 2023).

There is certainly no magic formula for calculating the number of representatives, but at least it is clear that changing the number of representatives in parliament happens all the time in democracies around the world. For instance, President Macron in France has proposed an amendment to reduce the number of parliament members by 25% after scandals and abusive expense claims submitted by members

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of the parliament (France24 2019). At the same time, Italy also undertook a constitutional reform in 2019, reducing the number of MPs and senator seats by 30%.

On the other hand, some countries frequently adjust the number of seats in parliament. For instance, Germany does so after every election because of the mixed electoral formula which is in application. Therefore, if a party wins a higher number of constituencies voted directly by the electorate (on a first past the post basis) than the number of seats it is entitled to on the basis of the list vote share, then those seats are not taken away. This happened in 2017 when 78 seats were added (*Economist* 2017).

Undoubtedly, these reforms have been accompanied by a wide-sweeping public debate on the positive and negative effects on a country's democracy. However, from these examples, we can see that countries may adjust the number of seats in the legislature by increasing or reducing the number of members of parliament based on their political and economic circumstances and the future visions they aim to accomplish.

Regarding Albania, there is no debate on the correct number of members of the parliament, even though constitutional reforms have been undertaken at several points during these thirty years of democratic transition. Most reforms have happened because of a change in the electoral formula or as a result of territorial or justice reform. However, the number of seats that there should be in parliament has not been the subject of political or academic debate. In order to enter into this topic, it would be reasonable to review the number of seats in the Albanian Parliament and how it has changed in these 111 years of the independent history of the state.

Table 1 shows that the number of representatives in parliament has changed on average every seven years. In these thirty years of transition toward democracy, it has changed no fewer than four times: from 250 to 140 to 155 and then back to 140, for reasons that are unknown.

Why fewer is better

Without a doubt, a smaller legislative body would make debate and legislative decision-making more efficient in terms of time, energy consumption and quality. Therefore, in 2020, following support for constitutional reform voted for in a referendum, Italy reduced the number of members across both the chambers of its parliament from 945 to 600 in a populist move to save one billion euros in a decade (BBC 2019). Such a reform had been initiated originally in 1948 by prominent Italian political personalities such as Luigi Einaudi and Giovani Conti, who claimed that fewer parliamentary seats were necessary for a more efficient legislative procedure (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri 2020). Nevertheless, the reform to reduce the number of members of parliament was only approved after no fewer than seven proposals had been developed in the post-War period.

The reasons behind the reform stand in the changing relationship between members of parliament and voters as a result of the application of developments in information and communications technology (ICT). Nowadays, public information and participation in decision-making are not the exclusive responsibility of members of parliament: civil society, interest groups, modern ICT equipment itself and ad-

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Table 1 – Changes in the number of seats in the Albanian Parliament

Years	No. of seats	Name of body
1914	36	National Assembly
27 March 1920 – 20 December 1920	37	Senate
21 April 1921 – 30 September 1923	78	National Council
21 January 1924 – 2 March 1925	100	Constitutional Assembly
1925-1928	57 & 18	Parliament with two chambers: Deputies and Senate
1939-1940	159	Kuvendi / Parliament
1946-1991	140	Kuvendi Popullor / Peoples' Parliament
1991	250	Kuvendi Popullor / Peoples' Parliament
1992-1996	140	Kuvendi / Parliament
1997	155	Kuvendi / Parliament
1998 – today	140	Kuvendi / Parliament

Source: Parliament of Albania (https://staging.parlament.al/Kuvendi/Historiku)

vances in transportation make public participation in decision-making a much more efficient process. At the same time, with a reduced number of seats, the Italian Parliament comes closer to the figure in the EU (see Table 2) and the costs to the state budget are significantly reduced (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri 2020). The composition of parliamentary groups will also be smaller and, consequently, the time for discussing draft laws in both chambers will be reduced, making parliament more efficient (Tucciarelli 2022).

Table 2 indicates that the parliaments of the European Union have a coefficient of representation of between 1 and 14 members for every 100 000 inhabitants. As noted, the predominant countries of the EU like Italy, France, the Netherlands, Germany and Spain all have a rate of about one representative (or fewer) per 100 000 head of population. Nevertheless, we should consider that these countries each have a sizable population of more than 50 million inhabitants so comparing these directly with Albania would be less appropriate.

However, we could compare Albania with the average rate in the EU. The average representative rate across the EU is about 3.5 representatives per 100 000 inhabitants, while Albania has a higher rate of 5 representatives per 100 000 inhabitants; only six countries within the EU have a rate of representation which outstrips this figure: Malta, Luxembourg, Cyprus, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Supposing Albania followed the average of EU member states, at today's population size of some 2.7 million inhabitants (according to INSTAT, the state statistical service), it

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Table 2 – No. of members of parliament in the EU and United Kingdom per 100 000 inhabitants

Malta	14.3
Luxembourg	10.0
Cyprus	9.3
Estonia	7.7
Latvia	5.2
Lithuania	5.0
Slovenia	4.4
Croatia	3.7
Finland	3.6
Sweden	3.4
Bulgaria	3.4
Ireland	3.3
Denmark	3.1
Greece	2.8
Slovakia	2.8
Portugal	2.2
Austria	2.1
Hungary	2.0
Czech Republic	1.9
Romania	1.7
Belgium	1.3
Poland	1.2
Italy	1.0
United Kingdom	1.0
France	0.9
Netherlands	0.9
Germany	0.9
Spain	0.8

Source: https://www.statista.com/statistics/1172438/parliament-members-in-the-eu-and-uk-by-country/

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should have a parliament of around 80-82 seats, reducing the total number of 140 seats by some 40%.

Furthermore, an MP in Albania represents a disproportionately considerable cost to the state budget, as the wage is five times higher than the average salary in the country (Shqiptarja 2023) whereas in Italy, a member of parliament has a salary of twice the average. Therefore, reducing the number of representatives would have some positive results on the state budget as well as on the quality of parliamentary debate both in plenary and in committee sessions.

Reasons for the reduction

First, fewer representatives in the Albanian Parliament would see Albania approaching the average EU representative ratio of 3.5 deputies per 100 000 inhabitants. Furthermore, the population has also changed since 1998, when the constitution was approved, from about 3 million inhabitants to 2.7 million in 2022. Emigrants leaving the country in these last thirty years remain on the electoral lists, but their ability to vote has not yet been provided for by the state. Hence, the 140 representatives in parliament are not actually representing even 2.7 million people, but many fewer.

Secondly, a smaller parliament will cost less and the possibility of scandals involving the abuse of funds will be lower.

Thirdly, fewer deputies will make the debate and decision-making more effective, of better quality and more time-efficient.

Fourthly, in the case of a reduction of 40% in the number of members of parliament, there will be 40% fewer candidates on the party lists. This means that the leaders of the political parties will automatically have more chances to make better selections when choosing candidates as there will be less room for low-profile representatives. Hence, Albania will gain by having greater quality members present in the legislative body. Such a phenomenon would also increase the responsibility of the MPs; they will feel more powerful and responsible regarding their behaviour. Consequently, fewer episodes of verbal violence and better quality debate will result.

Fifthly, a lower number of seats will probably bring about a reduction in the phenomenon of vote-buying, highlighted during elections by OSCE/ODIHR (2021), and in the political clientelism which occurs in all Balkan states, including Albania (Bliznakovski et al. 2017). The reduction would allow much less cultivation of such practices as a result of the number of candidates being lower while, at the same time, the candidates would, potentially, have higher profiles and greater integrity.

Conclusions

Additionally, having fewer seats in parliament would not reduce political representation as a democratic value. Nowadays, citizens can participate easily and become informed about political decision-making through the tools offered by information and communications technology and the transparency of governance. Hence, members of parliament are not the exclusive representatives of the people's interests. Citizens nowadays have the right tools for being active through civil

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society organisations and interest groups, which are more powerful and can influence political decision-making. Moreover, right across Europe, and including Albania, more attention is being given to the concept of subsidiarity, which means more effective participation of citizens in local decision-making through instruments of self-governance (Law 139/2015).

Ultimately, aspects of political and democratic representation in Albania would be improved by undertaking constitutional reform with the aim of reducing the number of seats in Parliament by about 40%, from 140 to 80-82 members. In this way, Albania would have a parliament more in line with that of EU countries, where the average ratio of representation is not 5 representatives per 100 000 inhabitants but 3.5.

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