DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES IN THE ELECTION CYCLE

The case of Albanian parliamentary elections in 2025

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Digital technologies in the election cycle

Public institutions and civil society across the world are benefiting from the technological and the AI revolution. They have used the technological revolution for good, to empower public institutions with AI models to flag corruption cases like in Brazil or Ukraine[1],[2]; or to enhance citizen participation through e-agoras, electronic-voting or mainstreamed access to digital services like Estonia has successfully championed. While technology has helped us increase effectiveness and automize lengthy processes, so it has increased exposure to unchecked information or manipulated content and activity. With elections being one of the cornerstones of democracy throughout centuries, we should prioritize policies and legislation that shields elections from the harmful use of technologies and focuses on the use of technology positively.

Albania, is a candidate country to the EU. The country has moved fast forward to introduce around 95% of its services digitally[3] or to use AI to approximate Albanian legislation to the EU acquis.[4] However, there has been limited to no public debate on the inclusivity, efficiency and ethical questions around the use of technology. As the country is profiled as a champion of using tech for good in its public sector, its legislation is fragmented and limited. Public literacy and accountability on Albania's digital journey are both missing. This op-ed focuses on the case of Albanian Parliamentary Elections (APE) in 2025 and how the Central Election Committee, political parties, candidates and CSOs made use of the available digital technologies.

[1] Manthrope, Rowland, From the fires of revolution, Ukraine is reinventing government, accessed at https://www.wired.com/story/ukraine-revolution-government-procurement/

[2] TCU Brazil, accessed at https://portal.tcu.gov.br/imprensa/noticias/tcu-invests-in-institutional-partnerships-data-analysis-and-the-use-of-ai-in-the-fight-against-corruption

[3] Rama në OBK për Inteligjencën Artificiale: 95% e shërbimeve sot në Shqipëri ofrohen online, Shqiptarja.com, 2024, accessed at https://shqiptarja.com/lajm/rama-ne-obk-per-inteligjencen-artificiale-tregon-ambiciet-95-e-sherbimeve-sot-ne-shqiperi-ofrohen-online

[4] Taylor, Alice, Albania turns to AI to beat corruption and join EU, accessed at https://www.politico.eu/article/albania-use-ai-artificial-intelligenve-join-eu-corruption/

Background

Since 2005 Estonia has pioneered the internet voting (i-voting), with some 51.1% of its citizens using it in the past elections. To be able to deploy this technology, Estonia launched a country scale technological revolution driven by principles of transparency, inclusivity, efficiency, public trust and data privacy for e-governance, e-participation and e-services.[5] Estonia serves as an example that resource restricted countries can use technology to overcome their limitations to increase citizen participation in elections. Estonia is only one example, but technology across the world has been used in many cases and processes and by many actors involved in the election cycle.

Election management bodies are making use of available technology to improve some of the electoral processes such as voter identification, voter duplication in voting lists, voter education or to administer complaints. Kenya's Electoral Boundaries Commission has opted for Whatsapp based chatbots for wide campaigns of voter education.[6]

Similarly, other election management bodies across Asia-Pacific, Africa and the Western Balkans, are integrating AI to administer elections in real time, offer multi-lingual voter education through chatbots or data analysis.[7]

On the other hand, political parties and candidates are increasingly using technology for election campaigning. In many cases social media has served as an uncensored medium vis a vis controlled media, hence providing an avenue to connect with voters.[8] Moreover, much of the campaigning nowadays takes place via social media with sponsored ads and targeted content facilitated by the platforms data collection practices and algorithms.[9] At times, parties have made use of instant messaging apps to coordinate campaigns or to spread voter education.

[5] E- Estonia, E-Governance, accessed at https://e-estonia.com/solutions/e-democracy/
[6]Hammar ,Cecilia and Martino, Enzo, What does electoral AI look like in practice?, 4 June 2025, accessed at https://www.idea.int/news/what-does-electoral-ai-look-practice-4
[7] Ibid.
[8] Russmann, Uta, Social Media as Strategic Campaign Tool: Austrian Political Parties Use of Social Media over Time, In Electoral Campaigns, Media, and the New World of Digital Politics, edited by David Taras and Richard Davis, 263–82. University of Michigan Press, 2022. Accessed at http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3998/mpub.12013603.16
[9] Hammar, Cecilia and Müller, Juliane, The ethical conundrum of electoral AI, 2 April 2025, accessed at https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/2024-01/protecting-democratic-elections-through-safeguarding-information-integrity.pdf

Background

However, with the increase of technology use for campaigning, many unethical practices have emerged, such as fake or bought activity in social media to increase visibility, coordinated bots and fake accounts to spread misinformation and disinformation in social media and instant messaging apps. On the other hand, with the rise of AI, political parties and third parties have used AI to not only spread disinformation but to also produce fake video or images of their political opponents to sway public opinion.

As parties and candidates run campaigns through social media, many times they overpas national legislation on campaign finance or use loopholes to avoid accountability for their online spending. Oftentimes they do not publish spending in social media platforms or online ads in search engines or in online media. They also use other actors or intermediaries such as supporting organisations or party supporters to pay for the online ads, hence bypassing campaign finance rules or spending limits.[10]

Such practices decrease campaign transparency, while most of the countries are unable to react due to outdated laws about online advertisement.[11]

Civil society can use technology to enhance transparency through acquiring information from the social media platforms if political parties don't offer clarity on their digital campaign spending. They can use AI to monitor, flag and identify hate speech or unethical campaign content that targets vulnerable groups or certain discriminated groups of society. With the increase of coordinated misinformation and disinformation campaigns, CSOs and citizens can monitor bot activity, as they can use AI or blockchain technology to identify synthetic content produced with AI such as deepfake videos and photos.

[10] Agrawal, Khushbu and Wolfs, Wouter, Political Finance has entered the digital age - now regulators must follow, 24 July 2025, accessed at https://www.idea.int/news/political-finance-has-entered-digital-age-now-regulators-must-follow-0
[11] Internet And Electoral Campaigns: Study on the use of internet in electoral campaigns, Council of Europe, study, 2017.

Safeguards to mitigate risks of technology use in the election cycle

If there is one lesson that Estonia can teach the world on being run digitally, it is that the process of using a new technology needs to be transparent, trusted, safe and well explained to the public.[12] Using e-voting should enable citizens and not risk their freedoms from data leakage, or increase doubts on the integrity of the process by questioning the anonymity or influence of the vote from third party influence. Moreover, technology use in elections must caution against the risks by either the intended or unintended use of the actors involved. For instance, while using best practices, it is important that such uses of technology are not a "one size fits all". Instead, they should adopt to the local context, institutional culture, socio-economic needs and political systems. It is also important to embark on a "fact-finding mission" to understand the institutional readiness and the digital literacy of staff that is going to work with the introduced technology.

For example, when election monitoring bodies are enabled with new AI models that are able to flag breaches of ethical codes by the parties during the online campaign, the models serve nothing if they are not tailored to fit the national laws, local nuances of phrases or subgroups of population.[13] Since technology can amplify existing issues while introducing new ones, it is suggested that electoral actors firstly introduce technology-based solutions which put citizens less at risk (e.x: voter education campaigns). Actors using technology in the election cycle must draft mitigation strategies to be aware of risks and contain unintended misuse.

Some other risks of technology use in elections include AI content production without being labelled as so, micro-targeting[14] through online platforms by discriminating certain groups of society[15] [16], or coordinated attacks online to censure diverging views.[17] Another major concern is the misuse of technology to justify, legitimize or be used to serve authoritarian tendencies.

[12] Gibaja ,Alberto Fernández, Castellaro ,Sebastian Becker and Hammar, Cecilia, A Global Digital Compact for Democracy, policy paper no.31, April 2024.
[13]Juneja, Prathm, Artificial Intelligence for Electoral Management, 2024, accessed at https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/2024-04/artificial-intelligence-for-electoral-management.pdf
[14] International Idea, Protecting Democratic Elections Through Safeguarding Information Integrity, Forum on Information Democracy, and Democracy Reporting International, accessed at https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/2024-01/protecting-democratic-elections-through-safeguarding-information-integrity.pdf
[15] Castellaro , Sebastian Becker, Lessons on AI from Latin America to the world, 9 July 2025, accessed at https://www.idea.int/news/lessons-ai-latin-america-world-5
[16] Hammar, Cecilia, A democratic foundation for electoral AI, 23 October 2024, accessed at https://www.idea.int/news/democratic-foundation-electoral-ai-1
[17] Ibid.

How digital technologies were used in Albania's Parliamentary Elections 2025

Despite technology being a tool for different actors throughout the election cycle, in Albania's Parliamentary Elections - APE, technology was used mostly to run political campaigns. The Central Election Committee (CEC), the election management body in Albania, had limited capacities and understanding how to benefit from the use of technology for awareness raising or election management.[18] Nonetheless they still conducted a simple voter education campaign on social media.[19] It is also positive that CEC used e-identification of voters in election day and piloted electronic voting in Tirana and Vora.[20] Voter identification and electronic voting was also piloted in some municipalities in the parliamentary elections in 2021 and the local elections in 2023. Even though e-voting was used for the third time, the public opinion remained divided if the use of technology increased the guarantee of fair elections or if it instead served the interests of political parties and could be manipulated.

Such contrasting public perception can be attributed to weak public awareness campaign on technology use in elections, and the divisive narrative deployed by the main political parties.

In Albania there is a lack of legal framework that regulates campaigning on social networks or the designation of a public body to monitor parties' online campaigning. To fill in the gap, for the first time, political parties signed a voluntary Code of Conduct for Digital Campaigning, committing to uphold ethical standards when using technology, increase transparency on online campaigning, respect data protection, and fight disinformation and hate speech.[21]

[18] Hammar, Cecilia and Müller, Juliane, The ethical conundrum of electoral AI, 2 April 2025, accessed at https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/2024-01/protecting-democratic-elections-through-safeguarding-information-integrity.pdf
[19] Likmeta, Besar, and Voko, Kristina, Social Media Monitoring: Albania's Parliamentary Elections 2025,report, 2025.
[20] OSCE/ODHIR Interim Report on Albania's Parliamentary Elections 11 May 2025, 28 April 2025, https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/3/0/590099_1.pdf
[21] Gjoncaj Marsida, and Shehu, Jonida, Albanian parties adopt code of conduct on digital campaigns, International Idea, 25 March 2025, accessed at https://www.idea.int/news/albanian-parties-adopt-code-conduct-digital-campaigns

Just prior to parliamentary elections, the government banned the use of TikTok social media, a decision which drew criticism from small political parties and CSOs alike. Small parties claimed that the decision was political and aimed at cutting avenues of free speech and political participation.[22] [23] For some political parties which were new to the public, having the option to campaign online and reach citizens directly without the filter of existing media, meant that they could break the censorship of widely controlled media landscape in Albania. These parties and their candidates had some of the highest number of posts and posts sponsored in social media.[24]

The actors which used the most digital technology tools were the political parties and their candidates, heavily relying on online presence in the META platform (Facebook and Instagram).[25]

These actors used it for voter education, to run and sponsor their campaigns, and to produce campaign material.

The main political parties[26] used social media as a tool to dominate the narrative both in traditional media and online, and by their increased online campaigning, they avoided the political debate that usually take place in traditional media.[27] A gender difference was also noticed in the online presence and content production, where women candidates contributed with only 29% of the content produced online, versus to 71% produced from men candidates.[28] As a reference, a total of 265,895$ was spent on online advertising, mostly targeting Tirana.[29] Whereas some of the new parties admitted to using AI for campaign content production as an innovation, but also as a tool to help with limited human capacities.[30]

[22] SCIDEV, The Anatomy of A Decision Restricting Digital Rights: The Good, the Bad, And the Ugly, accessed at https://scidevcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Working-paper_The-anatomy-of-a-DCoM.pdf

[23] Prroni, Daniel and Reci, Megi, Albania's TikTok U-Turn: Trading Regulation for a Ban, 4 March 2025, accessed at https://idmalbania.org/publication-cpt/albanias-tiktok-u-turn-trading-regulation-for-a-ban/

[24] Koalicioni për Reforma, Integrim dhe Institucione të Konsoliduara (KRIIK), accessed at https://kriik.al/home/shpenzime-per-reklama-politike-ne-facebook-dhe-instagram-2025/

[25] Likmeta, Besar, and Voko, Kristina, Social Media Monitoring: Albania's Parliamentary Elections 2025,report, 2025.

[26] Socialist Party, Democratic Party

[27] Likmeta, Besar, and Voko, Kristina, Social Media Monitoring: Albania's Parliamentary Elections 2025,report, 2025.

[28] Likmeta, Besar, and Voko, Kristina, Social Media Monitoring: Albania's Parliamentary Elections 2025,report, 2025.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Nina, Vitjona, Habit Agron Shehaj ndjekesit, kengen e fushates e ka bere chatgpt, 19 April 2025, accessed at https://albanianpost.com/agron-shehaj-habit-ndjekesit-kengen-e-fushates-e-ka-bere-chatgpt/

From the monitoring of the electoral campaign from April 11 to May 10, civil society identified 349 violations of the Code of Conduct.[31] The violations concerned mostly lack of transparency on online campaigning (47.3%), unethical use of AI generated content to attack their opponents (43%) and cyberbullying through derogatory language.[32] Whereas 58 third party pages were identified to promote or attack candidates with bot activity or manipulated content.[33] [34]

The sponsored political ads did not respect the electoral silence prior to election day, thus violating not only the Code of Conduct but also the Albanian Electoral Code.[35] Compared to the new parties, the main ones used intermediaries for online sponsoring to bypass campaign finance rules, or webpage sponsoring which is harder to track by CEC or CSOs. It was also observed that the main political parties had a more divisive and discriminatory language in their social media posting compared to new parties.

[31] Likmeta, Besar, and Voko, Kristina, Social Media Monitoring: Albania's Parliamentary Elections 2025,report, 2025.
[32] Gjoncaj, Marsida and Shehu, Jonida, Albanian parties adopt code of conduct on digital campaigns, 2025, accessed at https://www.idea.int/news/albanian-parties-adopt-code-conduct-digital-campaigns
[33] Karaj, Vladimir, Profilet në Facebook nga Vietnami përmbytin intervistën e Ramës në Opinion, BIRN, 10 May 2025, accessed at https://www.reporter.al/2025/05/10/profilet-ne-facebook-nga-vietnami-permbytin-intervisten-e-rames-ne-opinion/
[34] Likmeta, Besar, and Voko, Kristina, Social Media Monitoring: Albania's Parliamentary Elections 2025,report, 2025.
[35] OSCE/ODHIR Interim Report on Albania's Parliamentary Elections 11 May 2025, 28 April 2025, https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/3/0/590099_1.pdf

The way forward: the legal framework can help democracy strive when technology is used in elections

In a democracy, rule of law, citizens' digital rights and elections can be easily compromised through technology.[36] Tech companies are capable in innovating at a faster pace than our legislators' ability to ensure that such technologies benefits the society more than they harm it. Hence, it is crucial that all parties involved be that election management bodies, political parties, civil society and citizens, understand the full cycle of the technology deployed as well as its limitations by engaging constructively with it.

There are now efforts on the national and international level to legislate, establish policies and contain the risks coming from the broad use or misuse of digital technologies. Such examples include the recent UN Global Dialogue on AI Governance, UN Roadmap for Digital Cooperation, the Internet Governance Forum, the International Telecommunication Union Digital Transformation Guidelines, the Recommendations on Ethics of AI by UNESCO or the OECD Principles for Trustworthy AI.

Despite the international efforts, EU has established a reputation as a norm setter when it comes to digital policies and legislation. The Union has taken a more cautious approach by balancing citizens' rights and safety with the need to drive innovation.[37] For instance, in 2022 the EU adopted the Digital Markets Act (DMA)[38] and the Digital Services Act (DSA) as key regulations to enhance accountability, transparency and safety. [39] Whereas in 2024, the EU adopted the AI ACT regulation which is the first legal framework that sets guidelines on the trustworthy AI development and deployment. The AI Act has a risk-based approach, and most of the AI use which can be deployed in election processes falls either under unacceptable risk or high-risk. This infers greater scrutiny and safeguards for these models. In addition to the general tech policy framework, the Union in 2024 adopted new rules on online political advertising, to increase transparency and fight disinformation. [40] Some of the new provisions were applied in European Parliament Elections in 2024.

[36] Youngs, Richard, Rethinking EU Digital Policies: From Tech Sovereignty to Tech Citizenship, Carnegie Europe, 16 June 2025, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/06/rethinking-eu-digital-policies-from-tech-sovereignty-to-tech-citizenship?lang=en
[37] Ibid.
[38] European Union, Digital Markets Act, 2022.
[39] European Union, Digital Services Act, 2022.
[40] European Parliament, Towards new rules on transparency and targeting of political advertising, 2024.

The way forward: the legal framework can help democracy strive when technology is used in elections

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Albania is a candidate country to the EU. As it works on improving its democratic track record, it also needs to approximate its legislation to the EU acquis. Despite a recently approved law on data protection that is GDPR compliant[41], Albania still has a long way to establish a comprehensive tech legal framework that also covers technology use in elections. Given the current situation where technology has served to bypass rules or has been unethically deployed, the legislation approximation with the EU is necessary, while increasing the capacities and the involvement of CEC and civil society in digital ad and digital campaigning monitoring should be a priority.

[41]Law on the Protection of Personal Data, accessed at https://qbz.gov.al/eli/ligj/2024/12/19/124/921d3810-ab2a-4e45-bdca-bef3a84b2721