

## PUBLIC STATEMENT

### OF THE "JUXTAPOSING POLITICAL OFFERS" NETWORK RELATED TO THE LOCAL ELECTIONS OF MAY 14<sup>TH</sup>, 2023

**Tirana, May 19<sup>th</sup>, 2023.**

The Juxtaposing Political Offers Network (Përballja e Ofertave Politike) - POP Network is an initiative of 12 local, independent civil society organizations that aim to increase public debate and information to citizens during election periods, as well as orient political platforms towards citizens' needs and priorities.

In the first months of 2023, the POP Network created an open and independent platform where approximately 1,000 citizens from rural and urban areas in the municipalities of Tirana, Durrës, Vlora, Fier, Kukës, Shkodër, Vau i Dejës, Pukë, Elbasan, and Korçë expressed their needs and priorities in 62 discussion tables. The priorities of the citizens in each municipality were reflected in **ten (10) Social Contracts**<sup>1</sup>. The Social Contracts were based on four main areas: (i) Local Democracy and Good Governance, (ii) Social Justice, (iii) Local Economic Development, and (iv) Infrastructure and Public Services.

After drafting the Social Contracts, all political parties and their candidates in the 10 municipalities of the country were invited to participate in the public forums of the POP Network. The public forums, organized within the framework of the 2023 local elections, aim to promote democratic culture and provide an open and equal space for representatives of political parties to present their platforms and engage in discussions with citizens regarding the Social Contracts and their concerns.

Despite the efforts of the members of the POP Network, not all Albanian political parties had the political will to carry out a confrontation between the candidates for mayor. In light of these circumstances, the POP Network continued its mission by facilitating individual forums between citizens and mayoral candidates representing the major political forces in the country. The priority was given to addressing citizens' interests and tackling the problems that require heightened attention.

During the period of April-May 2023, **the POP Network organized 16 public forums in nine municipalities**<sup>2</sup>, where mayoral candidates discussed the civic priorities outlined in the Social Contracts. Fifteen (15) Social Contracts were signed by the candidates as a moral commitment to address the citizens' priorities. Through the implementation of public forums for Social Contracts, the POP Network demonstrated its unique ability among local organizations to bring mayoral candidates face-to-face with citizens, ensuring that citizens' priorities are addressed in the agendas of local elected officials. The POP 2023 activities stood out as the only initiative where citizens found a politics-free environment and had the opportunity to express their concerns at the local level.

<sup>1</sup> POP Network official webpage: <https://popnetwork.al/kontratet-sociale-2023-2027/>

<sup>2</sup> The forums were organized with six (6) Socialist Party candidates competing in the mayoral elections of Shkodër, Durrës, Vau i Dejës, Korçë, Kukës, and Vlorë; eight (8) candidates from the 'Together We Win' Coalition competing in the mayoral elections of Tirana, Fier, Durrës, Shkodër, Pukë, Kukës, Vau i Dejës, and Vlorë; as well as two (2) candidates from the Democratic Party of Albania in Tirana and Vau i Dejës, from three candidates from this political force competed in the ten municipalities where POP network organizations operate.

The organization of the forums and the signing of the Social Contracts are only the first steps of the process. Over the next four years, the municipalities will be monitored by the organizations of the POP Network to assess the progress in implementing the priorities identified by the citizens.

### The POP Network's opinion on the public forums held during the local elections on May 14, 2023

Below are some key issues that were identified during the electoral campaign period of the 14 May 2023 local elections, based on all the work that POP Network members did:

- In the public forums organized by the POP Network with the candidates, it was observed that a significant number of candidates lacked clear and transparent local programs or plans to address the citizens' problems. The mayoral candidates' programs were minimalistic, consisting of program points listed on leaflets. Throughout the campaign, there was a lack of in-depth discussion regarding local government finances and strategies to ensure support for citizens' priorities. The political discourse of candidates and party representatives often failed to include marginalized groups and their integration, or youths, women, and girls. The POP Network, through the Social Contracts, directly contributed to bridging the gap between the candidates' program offerings and the citizens' needs.
- Despite the positive engagement of most of the candidates, four public forums were not held before the elections due to the lack of willingness on the part of the candidates. However, the candidates acknowledged the significance of this discussion format and pledged that if elected, they would commit to signing the Social Contract and incorporating citizens' priorities into their four-year work plans.
- As stated in the OSCE/ODIHR report, the election campaign took place in a media environment characterized by several systemic problems that affected media freedom and journalism<sup>3</sup>. The POP Network adopted an alternative approach by hosting public forums online on their official Facebook page<sup>4</sup>. This allowed anyone interested to follow the forums in real-time and provided participants with the opportunity to interact with the candidates. This approach increased participants' interest and helped enhance transparency and citizen involvement in the electoral process. A significant number of citizens followed the public debates online. Additionally, there was a positive trend observed among some candidates who participated in the public forums, as they shared the forums on their social media platforms, providing citizens with more information about their programs.
- In all the organized public forums, all participating candidates were committed to signing the Social Contract and incorporating the priorities set by the citizens into their governing programs in the event of winning the elections. They expressed their determination to ensure that these commitments would not be mere electoral promises but would form an integral part of a concrete plan to achieve the goals identified by the citizens.

The POP Network will continue to be active at the local level, conveying the concerns of citizens who need bridges to connect with the local government. Simultaneously, the POP Network will monitor the implementation of the

<sup>3</sup> OSCE ODIHR, 2023 Statement of preliminary findings and conclusions. International Election Observation Mission, 14 May 2023, page 14.

<sup>4</sup> POP Network official Facebook Page: <https://www.facebook.com/POPNetworkAlbania>.

signed Social Contracts and will work towards signing Social Contracts in those municipalities where they could not be realized during the election campaign.

\*\*\*\*

POP Network “Juxtaposing Political Offers” (Përballja e Ofertave Politike) aims to increase public debate and information among citizens, as well as orient these platforms towards the needs and priorities of citizens. Through its activities, the project aims to strengthen Albanian democracy, promoting transparency and accountability. POP is an initiative of the network of Albanian civil society organizations supported by the Olof Palme International Centre and the National Endowment for Democracy.

**Members of the POP Network are the following organizations:**

- Gender Alliance for Development Center, Tiranë;
- Civil Society Development Center, Durrës;
- Vlora Youth Center,
- Association for Integration of Informal Areas, Kamëz;
- New Epoch Center, Fier;
- Young Intellectuals, Hope (IRSH), Shkodër;
- Youth Movement for Democracy, Pukë;
- Center for Youth Progress, Kukës,
- Youth For Integration, Activation, and Awareness, Pogradec;
- Women in Development, Korçë;
- Light Steps, Vau i Dejës;
- Another Vision, Elbasan

**For more information:**

<https://popnetwork.al/>

<https://www.facebook.com/POPNetworkAlbania>