

MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX

2008

**The Development
of Sustainable
Independent Media
in Europe and Eurasia**



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The Development of Sustainable Independent Media in Europe and Eurasia

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ALBANIA

The attempts of political powers to dominate the media have not faded; in fact, they have become more sophisticated. In addition, the influence of different economic lobbies, linked to oligarchs in the political circles, has become increasingly visible. In an environment rich in political pressure and poor in institutions that might promote separation of powers, freedom of the media in Albania remains under threat.

The numerous fiscal pressures that the government exerted on the media in 2006 produced negative results in 2007. Media who until recently viewed the government of Prime Minister Berisha quite unfavorably were forced to reverse their editorial policies. This development and others, such as government institutions refusing access to information and the slow approval by Parliament of a series of freedom of expression and digital broadcast licensing laws, have notably influenced the media situation in Albania.

Continuing political rivalry exacerbated the deteriorating media situation in Albania in 2007. Local government elections, which once again were regarded as not meeting international standards, resulted in the ruling Democratic Party losing Tirana and all the main cities in the country but preserving a slight advantage in rural areas. President Alfred Moisiu's term drew to a close and Parliament took up the task of electing his successor. The opposition wanted this post, the highest of the state, to be held by a consensual candidate in light of Berisha's control of all other state institutions. However, by cooperating with his former political enemy, Fatos Nano, Berisha was able to engineer the election of Bamir Topi from his party as president.

A few months after obtaining the presidency, Topi dismissed the chief prosecuting attorney, which his predecessor had opposed. This action has intensified the fear that the prosecuting authority will be misused by the government against members of the opposition and other critics in media and civil society.

Transparency International again ranked Albania as one of the most corrupt in the world. The hopes of many that Berisha would fight corruption have turned into disappointment. Small-scale corruption has become massive. Projects of the previous Socialist government, which were denounced as corrupt by the then-opposition, were continued by the opposition once in power. Corruption and incompetence precipitated an energy crisis that causes blackouts ranging from four hours a day in Tirana to 17 hours in remote areas. New cases of government corruption are denounced in the media on a continual basis.

This year's MSI study returned a score of 2.21, slightly lower than last year's 2.41. Four out of the five objectives suffered drops; only Objective 3 did not change. All objectives fell relatively close to the overall average, except for Objective 4, Business Management, that came in at 1.71. Albania's overall average was last among Southeast Europe countries.

ALBANIA AT A GLANCE

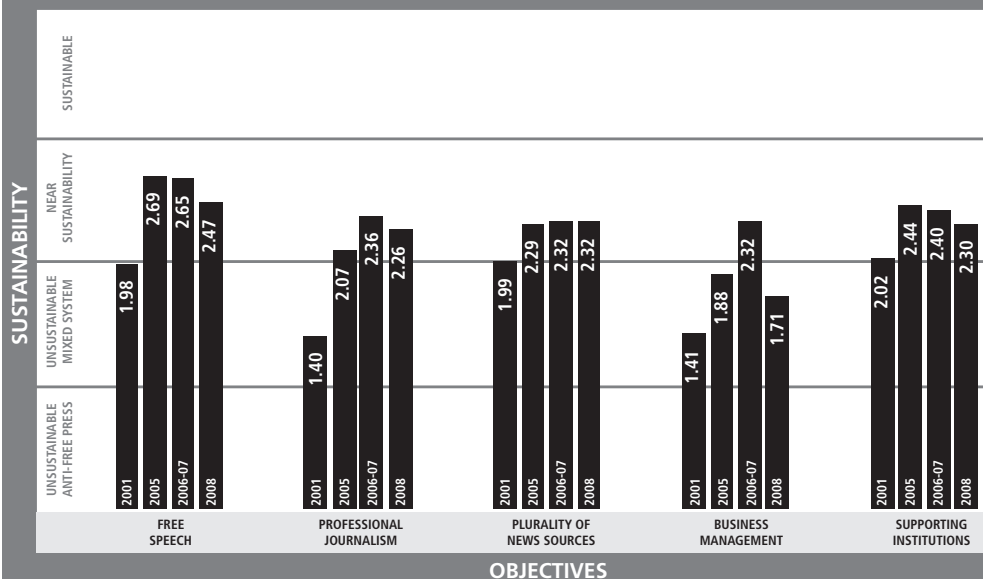
GENERAL

- > **Population:** 3,600,523 (July 2007 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Capital city:** Tirana
- > **Ethnic groups (% of population):** Albanian 95%, Greek 3%, other 2% (Vlach, Roma, Serb, Macedonian, Bulgarian) (1989 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Religions (% of population):** Muslim 70%, Albanian Orthodox 20%, Roman Catholic 10% (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Languages (% of population):** Albanian (official - derived from Tosk dialect), Greek, Vlach, Romani, Slavic dialects (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **GNI (2006-Atlas):** \$9.273 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2007)
- > **GNI per capita (2006-PPP):** \$5,840 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2007)
- > **Literacy rate:** 98.7% (male 99.2%, female 98.3%) (2001 census, *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **President or top authority:** President of the Republic Bamir Topi (since July 24, 2007)

MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- > **Number of active print outlets, radio stations, television stations:** Print: 200 total; Radio: 46 local and 4 national; Television stations: 68 local and 3 national (Source: Albanian Media Institute)
- > **Newspaper circulation statistics:** Total yearly circulation is about 30 million; individual circulation statistics for newspapers not available
- > **Broadcast ratings:** N/A
- > **News agencies:** Albanian News Agency (state-owned), ALNA (private).
- > **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** 15 million
- > **Internet usage:** 471,200 (2006 est., *CIA World Factbook*)

MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: ALBANIA



Unsustainable, Anti-Free Press (0-1):

Country does not meet or only minimally meets objectives. Government and laws actively hinder free media development, professionalism is low, and media-industry activity is minimal.

Unsustainable Mixed System (1-2):

Country minimally meets objectives, with segments of the legal system and government opposed to a free media system. Evident progress in free-press advocacy, increased professionalism, and new media businesses may be too recent to judge sustainability.

Near Sustainability (2-3):

Country has progressed in meeting multiple objectives, with legal norms, professionalism, and the business environment supportive of independent media. Advances have survived changes in government and have been codified in law and practice. However, more time may be needed to ensure that change is enduring and that increased professionalism and the media business environment are sustainable.

Sustainable (3-4):

Country has media that are considered generally professional, free, and sustainable, or to be approaching these objectives. Systems supporting independent media have survived multiple governments, economic fluctuations, and changes in public opinion or social conventions.

OBJECTIVE 1: FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Albania Objective Score: 2.47

This objective's average score showed a slight decrease compared to last year. Indicator scores varied quite a bit, with only four of the nine being scored near the average. Indicators 4, 8, and 9, crimes against journalists, media access to international news sources, and free entry into the journalism profession, all scored more than a half point higher than the average. However, panelists gave scores more than a half point lower than the average to Indicators 2 and 5, broadcast licensing and preferential legal treatment for state media.

Many speakers on the panel stated that there is a lack of political will to implement existing laws and also to improve legislation that supports freedom of expression and access to information. One of the panelists, lawyer Genti Ibrahim, said that his expectations one year ago on the improvement of media legislation have faded as long as the ruling majority has not yet approved a series of bills. This leads him to think that the hindrance is not just a technical one, but political will is absent altogether. "It is no coincidence that, similar to previous governments, the bills 'On Press,' regulating digital broadcasting and amending the Penal and Civil Codes regarding defamation continue to rot for some years now in the drawers of the Parliament," he said.

Meanwhile, panelists said that even with regard to the implementation of existing laws, there is a series of problems that hinder freedom of expression and access to information. According to marketing analyst Thanos Goga, sources of access to information for journalists not only have not increased this year, but they are at lower levels than before. Other panelists felt freedom of speech in Albania continues to be harmed in two ways: by obstructing it and by misusing it. "Public offices continue to be inaccessible," said panelist Ilir Yzeiri, journalist and professor of journalism in the University of Elbasan. Sharing his own experience as a journalist for the investigative anti-corruption program called "Hapur," financed by USAID, Yzeiri expressed his concern regarding the fact that journalists with cameras often find it extremely difficult or even impossible to enter the ministries.

Meanwhile, other participants in the panel stated that unlike the promises made for a more transparent and open governing vis-à-vis the media and the public, it is clear that government offices are increasingly shut to the journalists. A bitter feeling spread among the general public when the Council of Ministers refused to grant the general prosecutor's demand to possess, for investigation purposes of a corruption charge against one of its ministers, the minutes of a government

meeting. If the government refuses to hand over documents to the institution of the prosecutor, journalist's cannot expect much to come of their requests, asked the panelists.

Abuse of freedom of speech also appeared in the shape of indifference toward media. There were many cases when media denounced corruption but public institutions, whose job is to react, remained silent. This relates to the weakness that has long characterized Albanian society and its democracy, still in its infancy. This is particularly true in relation to the lack of independence of government institutions such as the judiciary. This renders freedom of speech a mere vanity, panelists said.

Licensing of the media continues to be shaped by a pronounced political clientelism, another symptom of politics and its power to control and use media. Gent Ibrahim is also member of the National Council of Radio and Television (KKRT), an institution whose task is to license media and oversee the implementation of broadcast-related laws. According to Ibrahim, the election of KKRT members continues to be a significantly political process. "When there is harmony between the decisions of KKRT and the government interests, the police or the tax police also obey these decisions; when this harmony is not existent, KKRT decisions are not implemented," he said.

Musa Ulqini, member of the opposition and member of the parliamentary media commission, referred to a KKRT decision to license a local station, TV Ora. "The licensing of TV Ora was a scandalous example of political pressure for establishing a

LEGAL AND SOCIAL NORMS PROTECT AND PROMOTE FREE SPEECH AND ACCESS TO PUBLIC INFORMATION.

FREE-SPEECH INDICATORS:

- > Legal and social protections of free speech exist and are enforced.
- > Licensing of broadcast media is fair, competitive, and apolitical.
- > Market entry and tax structure for media are fair and comparable to other industries.
- > Crimes against journalists or media outlets are prosecuted vigorously, but occurrences of such crimes are rare.
- > State or public media do not receive preferential legal treatment, and law guarantees editorial independence.
- > Libel is a civil law issue; public officials are held to higher standards, and offended parties must prove falsity and malice.
- > Public information is easily accessible; right of access to information is equally enforced for all media and journalists.
- > Media outlets have unrestricted access to information; this is equally enforced for all media and journalists.
- > Entry into the journalism profession is free, and government imposes no licensing, restrictions, or special rights for journalists.

television station in [the government's] own favor, at a time when a license was denied to more [compelling applicants]," he said.

"Having a media business, you do not encounter any discrimination or disadvantage as compared to other businesses," said Bashkim Hoxha, long the owner of Teuta TV, one of the most successful local stations. However, Hoxha further clarified that a considerable number of media do not pay taxes as the law requires. Hoxha recalled a notorious conflict that emerged in 2006-2007 between the government and the media company DigitAlb. At the time the government accused DigitAlb, whose media were rather critical of the government, of tax evasion amounting to approximately €13 million. Public opinion was that this was an overblown figure. Political opposition, segments of civil society, and some media accused the government of attempting to exert fiscal pressure to silence a critical media outlet. Doubts increased in view of the fact that the charge on evasion was aimed only against DigitAlb, while other media close to the government, did not experience such interference despite the real possibility that they also did not fully pay their taxes. The issue has remained unresolved.

To Gent Ibrahim, the selective interventions by the government have been rather obvious and this affected his score. Other panelists shared this view, saying that it was not sufficient for media as a business not to be discriminated against compared to other businesses, which are much more profitable than media business. Incentives, such as tax breaks, are needed to help ensure media can play their necessary role in a tough economic environment.

There have been no cases of journalists murdered in Albania. However, different forms of pressures against them have been present. In the early years of post-communist transition the then-democratic government tried to "discipline" free speech by exerting, at times, severe violence on journalists. Several journalists were imprisoned, while the newsroom of an independent newspaper was torched. This violence on journalists and the media had very heavy political consequences on the ruling majority at the time and on President Sali Berisha, who inspired this hard line. It seems this was a lesson he learnt. Currently, back to power as prime minister, Berisha has tried to build up a facade that lends the impression of correct relations between government and journalists. However, beyond the facade, relations are not that rosy.

Many levels of society do not favorably view journalists and media outlets that are critical of the government. There have also been cases when relatives of journalists that oppose the government have been fired only for this reason. In a poor country like Albania, unemployment of relatives is a powerful pressure tool to convince journalists to change their attitude.

In society at-large, many people still think that a journalist that criticizes is not a symbol of free speech, but rather an enemy of the party, enemy of the government, and enemy of the people as was the case under communism.

Again this year, panelists stressed that Albanian Public Television (TVSH) continues to favor the government, although politicians' need to control the content is not the same due to the emergence of numerous private stations. Even though TVSH no longer has the monopoly of television industry like it used to, it still remains a government stronghold that no politician is willing to give up. Once again, with the change of power in 2005, a change of all management of TVSH followed. "Since the management of the public media continues to be appointed by politicians, this public media has no way of being independent, hence it cannot be public," said Genc Ymeraj, journalist and ex-director of TVSH, currently working at "News 24" commercial television. However, to Lutfi Dervishi, director of news in the public television, political pressure derives more from the small parties. "I receive most of the calls from small actors in politics, who try to occupy a few more seconds in the news editions," he said.

To lawyer Genti Ibrahim, it is an unjustifiable privilege for TVSH to hold two national frequencies (one of which it has not used for years) while some rather developed commercial stations like "Vizion+" still only have a local license. Musa Ulqini interpreted this situation in a different manner. According to him, by leaving two national licenses to TVSH, the law does not intend to favor public television, but the public itself, so that the public broadcaster can establish a digital platform, where children of poor families, who cannot afford to subscribe to private platforms, can also watch movies.

Until recently public television enjoyed the most extensive coverage in the country, but currently it is experiencing problems. "To me the public television does not have any public, as in my city it is not received at all said," Shkëlqim Bylykbashi, owner of a television station in the south of the country.

The issue of libel and defamation remains unsolved. A statement by Prime Minister Berisha that his administration would not sue any journalists for libel is not a satisfactory solution, according to the panelists. This is not only because such a promise is temporary, but also it does not foster the harmonization of the work of journalists with the demands of the professional ethics. Presently in Albania there is a situation diametrically opposed to few years ago, when many journalists were taken to court for political reasons, disguised under the charge of libel and defamation. Nowadays the opposite is true. No reporter is taken to court, even though he or she truly insults or defames a politician. To many panelists, this kind of "freedom," which does not respect

human dignity and does not stem from the law, is not a freedom. Actions can become right only when justice is made through the law.

However, this is where the challenges begin. Albanian law on defamation and libel is not up to international standards. For several years attempts to amend the Civil Code and decriminalize libel and defamation by removing it from the Penal Code have been underway. However, these amendments have not been passed by the Parliament yet. Panelists attribute this to a lack of political will and it still affects their scores negatively. Even though no journalist has been taken to court, this is not a consequence of improvement of the skills of journalists, but rather the mercy of the government.

In general, all panelists felt that laws on access to information are satisfactory. However, panelists pointed to two problems in practice. For one, journalists often suffice themselves only with a press conference and rarely exploit their legal right to access more in-depth public information. "The lack of attendance of journalists [at] the energy tender by the Electric Corporation was not positive at all, especially when thinking that it is exactly these reporters that make accusations of abuses with energy tenders," said Bashkim Hoxha. The other problem is related to an increasing tendency of the public administration to remain shut to the media. "While I was working for the investigative program Hapur, we experienced difficulties in gathering information at many of the ministries and with many employees who begged us not to request any information, as they feared loss of their jobs," said Ilir Yzeiri.

The government does not restrict the use of international media sources in any way. However, access is limited by a couple of factors. For one, media outside of Tirana may have limited Internet access or other technical limitations that prevent them from getting news from these sources. The other factor is cost. In particular, media outside Tirana cannot afford to pay for the use of such sources. Similarly, the government does not restrict the ability of journalists to enter and practice the profession.

OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

Albania Objective Score: 2.26

Professional journalism remained more or less the same, with just a slight drop according to the panelists' scores. Most of the indicators scored within a half-point of the average. However, Indicator 3, self-censorship, scored about three-quarters of a point less than the average, while Indicator 6, balance of news and entertainment, scored almost three-quarters of a point more.

Panelists concluded that the emergence of an increasingly high number of quality journalists has not had the desired impact on the quality of news reports. According to the panelists, the weak link in the media is no longer the journalist, but the editor, who should demand compliance with the basic principles of journalism on a daily basis. It is not because of a lack of knowledge that it is very rare to find an article based at least on two sources, said Andi Tela, editor-in-chief of daily *Panorama*. "Many journalists write their news from their desk and only a few of them go on field to be in touch with the news," said Bashkim Hoxha. For other panelists, the problem stems from the overload journalists face, sometimes amounting to two or three articles per day. "Such an intensity of work forces journalists to be more superficial," said Iris Luarasi, professor in the journalism branch of the University of Tirana.

The more conflict in politics, the stronger the tendencies are to misuse newspapers and television stations as weapons against rival parties. Bitter political struggles also awaken internal struggles of media and journalists from rival political camps. The result is reporting by some outlets that is completely devoid of balance and does not reflect ethical standards.

A Code of Ethics has existed for some time in Albania. Only a few journalists with a high level of professional integrity follow this code. Many others ignore the code, and publish stories that defame outright officials or even fellow journalists with whom they disagree. Recently, the Council of Ethics was also established, but to date there is not one case when the Council of Ethics has addressed a problem regarding the violation of ethical standards by journalists. The panelists' opinion was that this problem is still unsolved.

JOURNALISM MEETS PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS OF QUALITY.

PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM INDICATORS:

- > Reporting is fair, objective, and well sourced.
- > Journalists follow recognized and accepted ethical standards.
- > Journalists and editors do not practice self-censorship.
- > Journalists cover key events and issues.
- > Pay levels for journalists and other media professionals are sufficiently high to discourage corruption.
- > Entertainment programming does not eclipse news and information programming.
- > Technical facilities and equipment for gathering, producing, and distributing news are modern and efficient.
- > Quality niche reporting and programming exists (investigative, economics/business, local, political).

The overwhelming majority of panelists admitted that media and journalists are subjected to self-censorship for different reasons. While years ago the cause of self-censorship was mainly politics, economy has increasingly become a factor nowadays. "It is more the business interests and the interests of media owners that impose self-censorship," said Aleksandër Çipa, journalist and president of the Union of Albanian Journalists. For example, the overwhelming majority of newspapers and broadcasters did not report on the protests over, or themselves come out against, high mobile telephone fees because the mobile telephone companies are among the most powerful buyers of advertising in the country.

However, panelists said the pressure of politics remains a source of self-censorship. Many media tried to avoid reporting on the scandal related to the construction of the Rrëshen-Kalimash road. The main cause for this was not the pressure from Bechtel, the investment firm. Rather, this was part of a severe political debate, which put the government in the center of corruption charges.

Self-censorship is related directly to whether Albanian journalists will or will not cover key issues. To the panelists it was evident that media and journalists address many issues important to the public. However, it was emphasized that it often happens that self-censorship hinders the fulfillment of this mission. Using the terms ironically, one of the speakers said, "It is precisely due to self-censorship that in some cases media and journalists cover up, instead of *discovering* the key problems." This is not only done by some stations in the favor of government, but also to the benefit of the political opposition. Recently, "News 24," a local station in Tirana, did not report at all on protests by tens of thousands of people held in Tirana because it was not in line with the interests of the Socialist Party, the biggest opposition party.

Albania is the poorest country in the Balkans and Europe and the salaries of journalists in general remain low, although they are not among the lowest compared to the rest of the population. "The salaries of journalists are above the average level of salaries in the society," said Bashkim Hoxha. Many others shared the same thought, including Musa Ulqini, who said that "compared to police, health personnel, or teachers, the salaries in the community of journalists are more satisfactory." Panelists assessed as positive a policy that forces private businesses (including media), to determine a minimum salary for employees. As a consequence, one cannot find a reporter in Tirana whose salary is lower than €300 per month.

However, the speakers noted one cause for concern: salaries remain significantly lower in smaller cities. One of the

panelists humorously formulated the "law" of the salary level, saying, "The salary of Albanian journalists diminishes in proportion to the distance from the capital." Aleksandër Cipa, president of the Union of Albanian Journalists, said, "The level of salaries of local journalists is so scandalous that it cannot even reach the average level of salary as defined by government standards. It is 60 percent of the community of journalists in the country that receives these kind of salaries." Panelists also decried journalists receiving their salaries with several months' delay.

Although panelists admitted that better salaries would deter corruption and promote adherence to ethics, panelists could not help but note that salary is not everything. "Even some journalists or editors-in-chief, who receive very high salaries, are not immune to different kinds of corruption," said Genci Ymeraj. Meanwhile, for Andi Tela, "you could pay a reporter even €10,000 per month and he or she will regardless sell himself or herself and accept to write commissioned articles, if this runs in his or her blood." However, it was admitted in general that the lower the salary, the greater the willingness to use the profession for corruption purposes.

The strong tendency of journalists to leave the profession as soon as they have a chance is also related to the relatively low salaries. There are a significant number of journalists who turn into spokespersons, or even members of parliament, as soon as there is a rotation of political power.

Another problem related to salary is that about 90 percent of Albanian journalists work without contracts, therefore owners easily pressure them to engage in self-censorship. Being in a situation where there is not yet a strong union for the protection of their rights, Albanian journalists have had only two options: to conform with the owners demands and abandon their professional integrity or to lose their job.

All panelists shared the opinion that entertainment programs do not eclipse news programs. In general the program framework of television stations is well-structured, preserving the right ratio of news, information, and entertainment. There are also stations that are devoted entirely to news, such as News 24, Nesër TV, Top News, and Ora TV. Other stations regularly use a news ticker at the bottom of the screen.

With regard to technical equipment and production values, there is a visible difference between Tirana-based stations and local stations. In Tirana today it is possible to find the most advanced techniques of digital broadcasting, mainly thanks to the investment by Top Channel and DigitAlb. These two companies installed the first digital terrestrial and

satellite platforms a few years ago. DigitAlb later enhanced its services through television broadcasting to mobile telephones, as well as with the introduction in the digital platform of two high-definition programs. Other television stations, like Vizion + or Klan also use rather modern premises and technology.

However, the situation appears to be completely different in the television stations of other cities. Even media in somewhat bigger cities and located in an area where business is more intensive, such as Durrësi or Shkodra, find it difficult to compete with the media in the capital when it comes to technology. Media in even more remote towns, in isolated and poor areas like Tropoja or Dibra, are in situations of technical poverty. "Many local televisions have made no investment for years and their poor situation regarding premises and technology is not even monitored by the National Council of Radio and Television, which, after granting the license, is interested only in collecting the taxes," said Shkelqim Bylykbashi.

Regarding the diversity of programming, panelists noted that in both print and electronic media all kinds of programs are present: besides political news you will also find business, culture, and sports. One of the panelists said, "In spite of the priorities that politics still enjoys over economy, or sports and culture, we are at a stage when the lack of news on the economy, sports, or culture is perceived as a unforgivable shortcoming of the station or newspaper."

In the past few years investigative journalism has been more present in the media. The television program *Hapur*, financed by USAID, has aired hundreds of stories investigated by Albanian reporters throughout the country. The program helped to involve even local journalists and media outlets in the investigative reporting on corruption and trafficking. It was broadcast by nearly 20 television stations in the districts and also by public television in Tirana. In spite of the difficulties and obstructions faced (in some cases *Hapur* reporters received threats and some stations, public television included, has declined to broadcast some segments) the program has had positive impact on the public and even on the law enforcement. There have been several cases where prosecutors in the districts were motivated by *Hapur* reports to open investigations. For example, after *Hapur* reported on monopoly rates in the mobile phone industry, the Parliament opened an investigation. Unfortunately, funding for the program ceased and no media outlets in Albania have found the funding to continue it. Another show, *Fix Fare*, has been aired by Top Channel for five years. Despite a big audience, it does not engage in investigating corruption at the highest levels of government, rather it is content on ridiculing low-level corruption.

OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES

Albania Objective Score: 2.32

This is the only objective that did not suffer a decrease compared to a year ago, however, it did not improve, either. Panelists gave a very good rating to Indicator 2, citizen access to news. However, Indicators 3 and 4, public media reflect the views of the political spectrum and operations of news agencies, scored well below the average.

Panelists noted that the range of problems related to sources of information is the same. One of the most debated problems concerned several contradictory developments in the press industry. On one hand, there is an increase in the number of newspapers, and, on the other hand, there is a decrease in their total circulation. So, although today there are about 30 daily newspapers, their total daily circulation does not exceed 70,000 copies. To panelist Ilir Yzeiri, journalist and professor of journalism at the University of Elbasan, one of the causes for this situation is that newspapers are produced only in the capital and are distributed only in the main cities, but do not reach the villages and the remote areas. "We have an Albania that is habitable only in the capital, where there are newspapers and Internet. On the other hand, there is another Albania, increasingly not fit to live, where newspapers do not travel and even if there is any Internet café, the prices are too high for the citizens" said Yzeiri.

Currently, the national press is showing symptoms reminiscent of the times immediately after transition, when many

MULTIPLE NEWS SOURCES PROVIDE CITIZENS WITH RELIABLE AND OBJECTIVE NEWS.

PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES INDICATORS:

- > A plurality of affordable public and private news sources (e.g., print, broadcast, Internet) exists.
- > Citizens' access to domestic or international media is not restricted.
- > State or public media reflect the views of the entire political spectrum, are nonpartisan, and serve the public interest.
- > Independent news agencies gather and distribute news for print and broadcast media.
- > Independent broadcast media produce their own news programs.
- > Transparency of media ownership allows consumers to judge objectivity of news; media ownership is not concentrated in a few conglomerates.
- > A broad spectrum of social interests are reflected and represented in the media, including minority-language information sources.

thought the failure of local print media was imminent. The increasing competition with electronic media hurts the circulation of newspapers. However, to the panelists, the main cause is poverty of businesses and poverty of people. The economic situation, which is still far from thriving, does not allow businesses to place enough advertisements in the printed press, at the same time that poverty is having its toll among newspaper buyers. Currently, the largest newspapers in the country hardly exceed a daily circulation of 15,000 copies. The fact that the two largest newspapers have the lowest price compared to other dailies was attributed to the poverty of buyers. "Many people with a monthly income of about €200 tend to buy a newspaper that costs 20 cents rather than another that costs 50," said Genc Ymeraj.

In fact, cover price remains one of the most debated issues among newspaper publishers. Even the slightest fluctuation in price is immediately reflected on the sold copies. Some publishers complain that a price below 20 cents is below the production cost. For this reason, they have demanded the drafting of a law that sets a floor price for newspapers. However, this is opposed by other publishers, who stress that such a measure not only counters freedom of the market, but will lead to fewer buyers, rendering the financial situation of the press even more difficult.

While to some panelists it is an alarming fact that in a country of about three million inhabitants only about 70,000 newspapers are sold per day, to other panelists the development of electronic media compensates as a way of informing people. Musa Ulqini appeared to be the most optimistic one regarding the plurality of sources of information, saying "I believe that in Albania, with its three million inhabitants, where one third of the population lives in the capital, and half of the population lives near the capital, where we have about 120 television and radio stations, the diversity of information sources is at its maximum".

Apart from technical and financial obstacles, there is no law in Albania to hinder access of citizens to local and international media. However, in spite of the expansion of the Internet, Albania remains the most backward country in the region and in Europe regarding Internet speed. This is rather worrying to Gent Ibrahim. According to him this might threaten freedom of information, because while information in newspapers and televisions can be controlled in many ways by politics and business, "Internet grants people a range of information that is difficult to control."

With regard to public media, which in Albania is represented by Albanian Public Radio and Television, the panelists said that in spite of an enrichment of programming at this station in the last year, government influence on its editorial policy is still visible. The panelists discussed why every time

governments change they continue to insist on controlling TVSH, at a time when commercial media are currently the main opinion makers. Bashkim Hoxha noted, "Public television continues to be considered as government media and not public media." However, to Musa Ulqini there is another cause, related to elections, which makes every government put TVSH under its control, and it is the fact that "public television is the only one whose signal is able to cover the northeastern part of Albania. In this area, due to the mountainous terrain and the low development of business, private media are not encouraged to invest."

There are no longer private news agencies in Albania. Attempts made in earlier years failed for different reasons. However, the public news agency, ATSH, does not seem to be any more successful. The panel noted that newspapers and stations rely increasingly less on news produced by this news agency. Apparently, the low quality of news produced by this agency makes Albanian media prefer to investigate and produce their own news. "Establishing a private or public news agency means that the news you produce is so good that other media want to buy it; this does not happen here," said Lutfi Dervishi. In fact, a strange relation seems to be in place between ATSH and private media. Instead of the news agency feeding news to the media, it seems that private media are the ones that feed news to the agency. Meanwhile, almost all newspapers and stations use as sources of information the news provided by internationally renowned agencies, such as Reuters or the Associated Press.

In general all media outlets produce their own news using in-house reporters. Newspapers, radio, and televisions concentrated in Tirana have the financial ability to employ far more reporters to cover wider areas. Local media is focused more on local news and some reporters employed there serve also as reporters for the biggest stations located in Tirana. National media in Tirana use local media as a source of local news and vice versa. Radio stations are mostly occupied with the music and other entertainment programming but both in Tirana and in rural areas they also provide brief news broadcasts during the day.

Regarding the transparency of media ownership, it can be said that while it is clear who the owners are, there is no clarity and transparency regarding the sources of financing. The fact that a year ago, the prime minister publicly charged some private media of being "daggers of the mafia" left a bitter feeling among the public. This rather grave charge remains unsupported to this day.

From the legal viewpoint there are no hindrances to developing private media for minorities. "The law allows for one or more individuals to open a local television in the Greek language or those for other minorities," said Musa

Ulqini. If this does not happen, it is only due to financial weakness of minorities. Meanwhile, the panel stressed that the public broadcaster has respected all conventions regarding sources of information for minorities. Currently the public radio and television broadcast programs in Greek and Macedonian where these minorities are present.

OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Albania Objective Score: 1.71

Panelists expressed concern that the economic and financial situation facing media is significantly undermining its independence and sustainability. The score decreased significantly, from 2.32 to 1.71 this year. All indicators fared rather poorly and scored near the average, although Indicator 7, audience and circulation measurement, received a score more than three-quarters of a point less than the average.

Almost all panelists shared the opinion that media and press distribution companies do not yet operate as efficient and professional businesses. With the exception of a few big television stations, such as Top Channel, TV Klan, or Vizion +, all other media cannot survive with advertising revenue or sales if they are not subsidized by parent companies or other interests that control them.

A large number of television stations in cities other than Tirana are in extremely difficult financial positions due to the anemia of businesses in those areas, making them unable to sufficiently support media with advertising revenue. Many of these media survive only thanks to the maximum reduction of costs, which translates into very backward technology, reduced staff, limited programs, and low salaries for journalists.

The present situation is similar to local newspapers, which disappeared in the transition years. Currently in Albania all newspapers and magazines are published only in the capital Tirana. Many people fear that this could happen even with electronic media, especially television stations. The concentration of the media only in the capital would have negative consequences. This would increase the potential for media control and manipulation by the central government. Capital-based media could not provide in detail the range of issues and information that citizens in other cities need. This is a particular problem during decentralization reforms: local media are needed to inform citizens on the governing process of these increasingly powerful local governments.

The panel discussion addressed in greater detail the press problem. There are currently about 22 daily newspapers in the country, but the number of sold copies is very low.

With the exception of a handful of newspapers that sell up to 15,000 copies per day, there are many newspapers that do not sell even 1,000. It is precisely the subsidies from the owners that keep them on the market. "Many newspapers are like a patient in the intensive care unit and would die immediately if you unplug all the 'equipment' and 'injections,'" said Genci Ymeraj.

The existence of many newspapers and the still-small advertising market (which is even smaller for newspapers, since most of the advertising pie is absorbed by television), leads to newspapers having significantly lower revenue compared to the cost of their production. Prices of advertisements are also very low. "If the price of an advertisement in a country like the Czech Republic can be €8,000, in Albania you can publish an ad in a newspaper even with €200," said Lutfi Dervishi.

The only successfully managed part of the press industry seems to be the printing houses. The same cannot be said about the press distribution companies, which, similar to newspapers, suffer the consequences of small advertising revenue. Supported by the owners of some newspapers, these companies distribute the press only in the cities and do not reach rural areas, where a sizable part of the population still lives. Nobody has ever calculated whether the expansion of the market to include the villages would bring enough revenue as to justify such a move. The problem remains caught in a vicious circle: newspapers do not go to the villages because there is no money to do so and newspapers lack money because they do not go to the villages.

Several local private advertising agencies exist, but there are no international advertising companies present in Albania.

INDEPENDENT MEDIA ARE WELL-MANAGED BUSINESSES, ALLOWING EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE.

BUSINESS MANAGEMENT INDICATORS:

- > Media outlets and supporting firms operate as efficient, professional, and profit-generating businesses.
- > Media receive revenue from a multitude of sources.
- > Advertising agencies and related industries support an advertising market.
- > Advertising revenue as a percentage of total revenue is in line with accepted standards at commercial outlets.
- > Independent media do not receive government subsidies.
- > Market research is used to formulate strategic plans, enhance advertising revenue, and tailor products to the needs and interests of audiences.
- > Broadcast ratings and circulation figures are reliably and independently produced.

Several television stations, radio stations, and newspapers, prefer to manage their own advertising activity. The main problem for the media in the country is not how the advertising industry is managed. Clearly, with the passing years, the quality of management of advertising has improved a lot. Unfortunately the advertising market in Albania remains very poor, and the biggest stations in Tirana collect most of the available advertising. Working with advertising agencies, these stations receive advertising from the big companies in the country, like the mobile telephone providers or Coca-Cola. The advertisements of local businesses usually end up with local stations. Even though advertising remains the main source of revenue for all media, given that the fees charged are rather low this revenue is insufficient to make stations profitable, particularly local ones.

With regard to government subsidies to the media, legally they do not exist. However, to many participants in the panel informal subsidies exist. "Many of the notifications on tenders or privatizations are made by public entities based on political preferences," said Bashkim Hoxha. According to Andi Tela, "the pages of newspapers close to the government are filled with notifications of public institutions, while they are absent in other newspapers."

However, panelists did not assess as positive the government's policy to stop the placement of public advertising in private media. Instead of averting media dependence on the government, according to the panelists this measure further weakens the financial position of the media, increasing their chances to fall under the influence of other financial supporters. To Ilir Yzeiri, the cut-off of public advertising to media does not make sense and it is even harmful at a time when even after applying this policy the media have not changed, being still divided for and against the government.

Little, if any, market research is undertaken in Albania. Advertising decisions are not fully determined by the size or demographics of the audience, rather the political and other factors play a strong role in the distribution of advertisements among media outlets. Therefore, the media is not interested in scrutinizing the preferences of its own audience. Only the biggest television stations like Top Channel or Vision + have financial means for that. It was reported that these stations did some focus group research in the past, but none recently.

In recent years some private television stations or media companies have occasionally carried out audience measurement studies. However, since a media outlet commissioned these studies, rival media mistrust the results. According to Iris Luarasi, the main problem is that these studies allow for the potential of subjectivity. Luarasi indicated that it would be completely different if the study were carried out with joint financing of several media or by a

prestigious institution specializing in these studies. However, similar institutions do not exist yet in Albania, while the chances for competing media to cooperate on financing such a study are rather slim.

As a result of the lack of trustworthy research, many newspapers with a very small circulation or televisions with rather limited audiences sell themselves as important media. This misleads the advertising business. However, in general, many media owners are not interested in knowing the real dimensions of the media they own. "Asking a newspaper owner what is the circulation of his newspaper might sound as an impolite request and is equally unwelcome as asking a not-so-young woman about her age," one of the panelists stated wryly.

OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

Albania Objective Score: 2.30

This objective experienced a slight decrease compared to a year ago. The drop might have been more significant, but panelists stated that they were prompted to temper their scores in view of the activity that the Union of Albanian Journalists (UGSH) has been carrying out. Nonetheless, scores on the performance of trade and professional associations were the lowest in the objective, and in particular Indicator 1, on trade association, scored a point lower than the average. On the high side, Indicators 6 and 7, access to printing facilities and apolitical channels of distribution, fared much better.

UGSH was established three years ago with the support of USAID. "Until now all organizations or media associations have only remained in letter. Only the Union appears as an active organization, which travels outside Tirana, organizes meetings with journalists and is registering them, and carries out press conferences on media problems. Finally, after 17 years we are noticing an embryo of an organization of journalists, which indicates that it is likely to grow," said Lutfi Dervishi. In addition, UGSH, for the first time, has helped develop and implement a strategy to enable the signing of labor contracts for journalists. The first step of this strategy was the signing of an agreement between the Union of Journalists and the Ministry of Labor. The Union has since helped journalists from several important stations, like Top Channel, to obtain contracts.

As it has been in past years, the associations of publishers and media owners have been active in protecting the interests of owners. They have lobbied the Parliament and government regarding media legislation, such as with the law on digital

broadcasting. However, their activity remains very limited and they do not have the strength to impose their opinions to the government in a more generalized manner to address the broad range of problems facing media in Albania.

Civil society and NGOs support media and freedom of expression. The Albanian Helsinki Committee is a particularly active NGO, having reacted swiftly and successfully every time there have been cases of violation of journalists' rights or freedom of speech. Many other NGOs have been involved by offering expertise to help improve media legislation.

There are numerous possibilities for training journalists in Albania. Currently there are three journalism faculties in three cities. There is also the Albanian Media Institute in Tirana, which carries out numerous trainings. However, the panelists noted that the willingness of journalists to be part of these trainings has decreased. According to one of the panelists, this is because the culture of lifelong training is not part of the mindset of media publishers or owners yet. In some of the more advanced media significant resources are invested on technology, but very little is spent on journalism training.

Panelists in general highly rated the role of printing houses and distributors, noting that they are commercial, apolitical, and not restricting the printed media in any way. Broadcasters own their own transmitters, however, the government has been known to shut down those belonging to critical media that they charge operate in violation of the terms of that station's license.

List of Panel Participants

Fatos Baxhaku, freelance analyst and journalist, Tirana

Andi Tela, editor-in-chief, *Panorama* Newspaper, Tirana

Luftim Vani, station owner, Mati TV, Mati

Lutfi Dervishi, freelance journalist, Tirana

Iris Luarasi, owner, Radio Ime; professor of journalism, University of Tirana, Tirana

Musa Ulqini, member, Parliamentary Commission on Mass Media, Tirana

Gent Ibrahim, lawyer, Tirana

Bashkim Hoxha, owner, Teuta TV, Durres

Genc Ymeraj, editor, News 24 TV Station, Tirana

Shkelqim Bylykbashi, owner, TV 4 Station, Lushnja

Thanas Goga, marketing analyst, Tirana

Ilir Yzeiri, professor and freelance journalist, Tirana

Moderator and Author:

Andrea Stefani, senior media advisor, IREX/Albania, Tirana

Assistant: Sokol Lilo, assistant, IREX/Albania, Tirana

SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS FUNCTION IN THE PROFESSIONAL INTERESTS OF INDEPENDENT MEDIA.

SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS INDICATORS:

- > Trade associations represent the interests of private media owners and provide member services.
- > Professional associations work to protect journalists' rights.
- > NGOs support free speech and independent media.
- > Quality journalism degree programs that provide substantial practical experience exist.
- > Short-term training and in-service training programs allow journalists to upgrade skills or acquire new skills.
- > Sources of newsprint and printing facilities are in private hands, apolitical, and unrestricted.
- > Channels of media distribution (kiosks, transmitters, Internet) are private, apolitical, and unrestricted.