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*Newspapers, magazines, radio stations, and television stations continue to feel the weight and consequences of economic crisis, which silently erodes their independence... Online media appear to be the only area of growth and expansion.*



# ALBANIA

After receiving EU candidate status in 2014, Albania's EU integration process stagnated in 2015. With the start of EU membership negotiations contingent upon the extremely difficult challenge of judicial reform and the struggle against corruption, which persists at high political levels, the country was unable to launch the talks. Chronic political conflict remains another barrier.

In its first two years, the government of socialist Edi Rama managed to reverse the downward economic trend. However, the GDP growth proved insufficient to lift visibly the living standards for much of the population. Unemployment and poverty remain rather high. Government attempts to limit these phenomena have only partially succeeded, as widespread corruption and clientelism continue to undermine the rule of law.

Albania belongs to those states that transitioned from communist dictatorship to democracy without establishing an autonomous state administration and without experiencing rule of law. In the 25 years since communism fell, each government has used the public administration to collect votes by offering their supporters posts in government, making sure to fire the supporters of previous governments. Although the left wing, currently in power, has shown greater constraint in cleaning up the bureaucratic apparatus, the situation remains critical. Legal protections offered to secure civil service posts have largely failed and the system prevents merit-based employment and facilitates the abuse of political power.

Albania also lacks an independent judiciary, allowing large-scale corruption to go unpunished. Despite corruption and the fact that media frequently speak up to denounce scandals, no high official (at the deputy minister level and above) has ever been punished on corruption charges. Even though powerfully supported by the international actors, corrupt clans—present in all political camps—seem secretly to obstruct attempts at judicial reform. A majority of the public expresses support for an independent judiciary, but the aspiration ends there. In reality, no force or social stratum has rallied to support this goal, and its proponents have proved no match for the camps opposed to reform. Reformists suspect that corrupt political clans, threatened by the prospect of a judicial authority they no longer control, fuel the political conflict with the express aim of dragging out the reform process endlessly.

With few positive strides to report in the media realm, the MSI score remains virtually the same as the 2015 study. Newspapers, magazines, radio stations, and television stations continue to feel the weight and consequences of economic crisis, which silently erodes their independence. The panelists also report problems with media regulators and with the public television station. Online media appear to be the only area of growth and expansion.

# ALBANIA at a glance

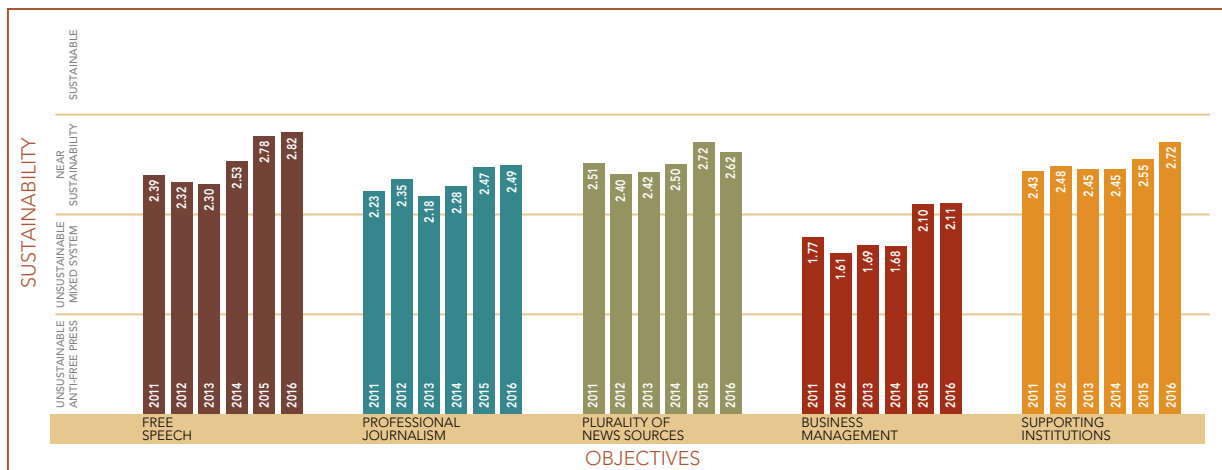
## GENERAL

- > **Population:** 3,029,278 (2015 est. *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Capital city:** Tirana
- > **Ethnic groups (% of population):** Albanian 82.6%, Greek 0.9%, other 1% (including Vlach, Roma (Gypsy), Macedonian, Montenegrin, and Egyptian), unspecified 15.5% (2011 est. *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Religions (% of population):** Muslim 56.7%, Roman Catholic 10%, Orthodox 6.8%, atheist 2.5%, Bektashi (a Sufi order) 2.1%, other 5.7%, unspecified 16.2% (2011 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Languages:** Albanian 98.8% (official - derived from Tosk dialect), Greek 0.5%, other 0.6% (including Macedonian, Roma, Vlach, Turkish, Italian, and Serbo-Croatian), unspecified 0.1% (2011 est. *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **GNI (2014-Atlas):** \$12.88 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2016)
- > **GNI per capita (2014-PPP):** \$10,180 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2016)
- > **Literacy rate:** 97.6%; Male 98.4%, Female 96.9% (2015 est. *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **President or top authority:** President Bujar Nishani (since July 24, 2012)

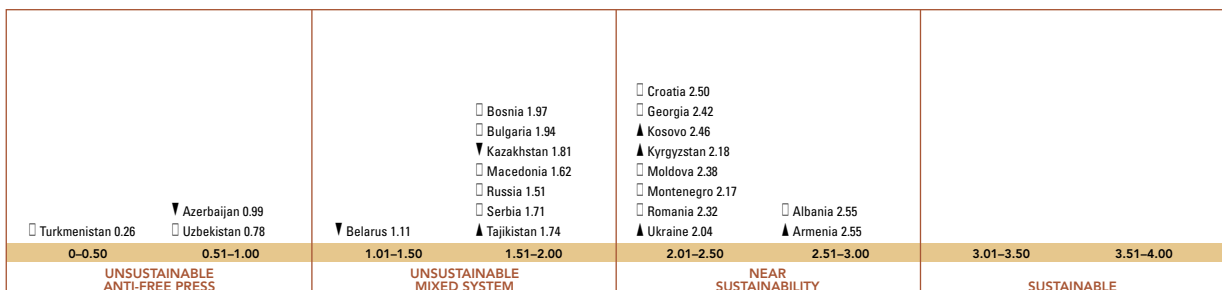
## MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- > Number of active print outlets, radio stations, television stations: Print Outlets: 160 (estimate); Radio Stations: 3 national, 56 local (Audiovisual Media Authority); TV Stations: three national, 71 local, two satellite, 83 cable (Audiovisual Media Authority)
- > Newspaper circulation statistics: N/A
- > Broadcast ratings: N/A
- > News agencies: Albanian Telegraphic Agency (public), NOA (private), AMA (private), Albpress (private)
- > Annual advertising revenue in media sector: €48 million (est., ABACUS Research)
- > Internet users: 1.8 million (Internet World Stats)

## MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: ALBANIA



## MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX 2016: OVERALL AVERAGE SCORES



### CHANGE SINCE 2015

▲ (increase greater than .10) □ (little or no change) ▼ (decrease greater than .10)

**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.

Scores for all years may be found online at [http://www.irex.org/system/files/EE\\_msiscsres.xls](http://www.irex.org/system/files/EE_msiscsres.xls)

## OBJECTIVE 1: FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Albania Objective Score: 2.82

Albania's media managed to weather successfully several attempts in 2015 to change the legal framework in ways that did not favor freedom of expression. For example, a government initiative sought to amend the penal code by adding the criminal offense "Defamation against a high or elected state official." The bill demanded that defamation of a high state official be punishable by fine or up to three years in prison. Defamation and libel are partially decriminalized in Albania; although considered criminal offenses, they are punishable only by fine. The media community demands full decriminalization of defamation and libel by removing it from the penal code altogether, and the approval of the draft law would mark a step backward in freedom-of-expression regulation. The government tried to justify its initiative by arguing that the bill aimed to prevent the offenses and defamation that politicians exchanged with one another and did not target journalists. In fact, the formulation of the proposed amendment did not include such a distinction and seriously endangered freedom of expression of media and journalists.

On a positive note, the strong reaction of media and civil society circles in the country forced the government to withdraw the initiative. "There were two pieces of news

### 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 or registration of media protects a public interest and is fair, competitive, and apolitical.
- > Market entry and tax structure for media are fair and comparable to other industries.
- > Crimes against media professionals, citizen reporters, and media outlets are prosecuted vigorously, but occurrences of such crimes are rare.
- > The law protects the editorial independence of state of public media.
- > 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 available; right of access to information is equally enforced for all media, journalists, and citizens.
- > Media outlets' access to and use of local and international news and news sources is not restricted by law.
- > Entry into the journalism profession is free and government imposes no licensing, restrictions, or special rights for journalists.

this year, one good and one bad. The bad news was the initiative of the government to recriminalize defamation, while the good news was that the reaction of media, the Union of Journalists, and civil society forced the government to withdraw," said Remzi Lani, director of the Albanian Media Institute (AMI). Iva Seseri, a lawyer with the Albanian parliament, added, "Media and civil society have been very active in this discussion, and it can be said that thanks to their powerful reaction these initiatives did not become laws." Meanwhile, Milton Nushi, media advisor to the government of Albania's Ombudsman, insisted that the standard of freedom of expression could be higher if defamation and libel are fully decriminalized, since, although jail punishment has been abrogated, punishment by fine is still in force. "Defamation and libel are civil issues, and they should be treated accordingly in the legislation," Nushi asserted.

Another problem that stirred debate in the panel is a parliamentary initiative to impose legally the liability of administrators of electronic portals, including websites of media outlets, to hinder the publication of every comment that affects a person's honor, personality, or reputation. For this purpose, the draft law aimed to introduce some amendments and additions to the civil code.

The public discussion that followed gathered opinions from several institutions, such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Ombudsman, the Audiovisual Media Authority, and the AMI, as well as lawyers, journalists, and civil society. Their responses acknowledged the rather delicate relation between freedom of expression and the need to protect personal dignity, honor, and reputation: protecting personal dignity is a genuine need that can be realized without infringing upon freedom of expression, but rather by fostering dialogue and self-regulation of the country's main media groups, as well as their electronic portals.

However, the panelists expressed different opinions on the matter. Some maintained that self-regulation is the best solution, while others find it insufficient at a time of excessive defamation and libel of people in social networks and online. According to Seseri, "If the administrators of portals were held liable for the offenses and defamation, it would mark a regression in free-speech legislation, as, in order to obey the law, they would tend to publish as few comments as possible." Ilir Yzeiri, a journalist and journalism lecturer at the University of Elbasan, offered a different opinion: "We are staring at a catastrophic situation, where social networks are full of slander and offenses, since online media or forums allow the publication of comments without applying any filter." This issue seems set to continue to cause controversy, considering that Albania's media still lack a self-regulatory body to monitor the implementation of the Code of Ethics of Journalists.

**“We have a poor model, which, instead of preventing the intrusion or influence of political will over the AMA, makes it inevitable,” Nushi concluded.**

The approval of the law “On public notification and consultation” in 2015 marked a positive legislative development. This law obliges the body or persons drafting a law to start a process of notification and consultation with the public before the final draft is sent for approval to the parliament. In fact, the government did not meet this legal requirement when it initiated the recriminalization of defamation and libel.

However, it can be concluded overall that a constitutional and legal framework that protects the freedom of expression, and is harmonized with the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights, remains one of the fundamental features of Albania’s media.

Assessing the state of the licensing process, the panelists described the political crisis that has paralyzed the regulatory agency of radio and television broadcasting, the Audiovisual Media Authority (AMA), for four years. According to the panelists, the problem lies in the model chosen. Composed of six members—three chosen by the ruling majority and the other three by the opposition—its bipartisan structure aimed to assure the AMA’s independence. However, given the chronic conflict between the two main parties (left-wing socialists and right-wing democrats) that dominate political life, the AMA’s bipartisan structure instead made the agency a victim of politics. With representatives of the right-wing democrats boycotting the institution, it is effectively deadlocked—unable to make decisions requiring a qualified majority, including granting media licenses. “In the last four years, we have not licensed a single radio and television operator,” said Zylyftar Bregu, a journalism lecturer at the University of Tirana and an AMA member. The only decisions the regulator has made in this period pertain to punishment and fines for piracy.

“We have a poor model, which, instead of preventing the intrusion or influence of political will over the AMA, makes it inevitable,” Nushi concluded.

Lutfi Dervishi, a freelance journalist, highlighted a new danger facing the regulatory institutions: that of going from political control to control by the most powerful media

operators. “This is a real and present danger that has shown its claws and teeth,” Dervishi said.

The panel concluded that market entry for the press remains free and that, from a fiscal point of view, it faces no more discrimination than other businesses. The press is subject to all financial dues according to legislation, and the state does not provide subsidies. “Media are not subsidized by the government, even in the context of the great economic hardship the media is going through as a result of the crisis,” said Bajram Peçi, director of *Shqip*.

The panelists generally concurred that crimes against journalists occur infrequently but mentioned a few instances—often in the form of pressure and threats from criminal groups, maltreatment by police, and offenses by government officials or politicians. According to Bledi Gila, vice editor-in-chief of *Shqip*, “There have not been many assaults against journalists, but there have been threats—met with indifference from police authorities to discover and punish the authors.” Anila Basha, editor-in-chief of the News Bomb news portal, said Albania’s case is very distant from that of countries such as Turkey, where journalists are openly arrested and assaulted and where there are public protests on their protection. According to Basha, verbal, rather than physical, violence prevails against Albanian journalists.

Statements by the Union of Albanian Journalists (UGSH) offer a more complete record of attacks on journalists in 2015. For example, in January 2015, the UGSH’s Gjirokastra branch issued a statement criticizing the director of the local radio and television broadcaster for repeatedly violating journalists’ personal freedom. In another statement, in February 2015, the Union denounced what it considered the offensive behavior of Prime Minister Edi Rama against TV Klan journalist Erisa Zyka.

In March, Artan Hoxha, a well-known investigative journalist, received a death threat on his mobile phone from a criminal group. The Union expressed its solidarity with Hoxha and called on the authorities to investigate and punish the authors of this mafia-like threat. The threats were repeated against the same journalist and against his camera operator in September 2015, after they shot footage of fields planted illegally with cannabis.

According to the Union’s statements, May 2015 was overloaded with incidents against journalists, perhaps due to the ongoing campaign for local elections. The Union protested against the threatening and aggressive stances of two parliament members against a Top Channel journalist and an ABC News camera operator on assignment in the parliament. The Union also expressed solidarity with *Gazeta Shqiptare*’s Aurora Koromani, another threatened reporter.



In the same month, timber smugglers kidnapped an ABC News journalist and a Top Channel journalist while the journalists were trying to report on illegal timber harvesting. Another Union statement denounced the police violence in the headquarters of Malesia e Madhe against the crew of the local television station TV Rozafa. In July 2015, the Union's Shkodra branch publicly criticized the head of the local police district for violence against reporter Senad Nikshiq.

Public radio and television (RTSH) remains totally unreformed. The panel reached this conclusion because RTSH's steering council has failed, for more than a year, to elect its general director. The interference of political parties in the ruling coalition, as well as the opposition, has prevented RTSH from reaching the necessary quorum on the position. According to some panelists, this situation also stems from the current regulation on public television, which establishes a steering council based on the balance of members proposed by political parties. However, other panelists think the problem stems more from the implementation of the law. According to Yzeiri, "The law on public media was drafted based on consensus, but the spirit of consensus was violated—and currently public television is not functioning according to the law." Yzeiri said that the main duty of the steering council is the election of the director, and if it cannot manage that task, it should be disbanded. Lani agreed: "Just as in the case of parliament, when it is unable to elect the president of the republic, it is disbanded."

The panel concluded that RTSH remains far from fulfilling its mission and continues to function as the television station of each incumbent government, rather than standing above the two political wings.

Although defamation and libel in Albanian legislation have not been fully decriminalized (the prison term for journalists has been removed, but punishment by fine is still part of the penal code), the panel deemed it positive that the government withdrew from the initiative to bring back prison term as a punishment for defamation. If the amendment passed, it would be dangerous for journalists and mark a significant regression in the legislation.

In 2015, the number of court cases against media or journalists continued to be low. According to AMI specialist Ilda Londo, an AMI monitoring report indicated, "In a period of three years there have been about 40 cases of defamation against journalists or media, and in half of them the plaintiffs gave up on the trial, while for the rest, most of the court decisions have favored the media."

The panelists noticed the fact that defamation and libel remain significant concerns in online media, especially in newspaper forums. However, in these cases journalists are not guilty of offenses or defamation. Quite the opposite: journalists are the victims of slander or offenses by people who do not like the views expressed in the articles.

Some panelists shared their view that online media also should be regulated, like other media. While in recent years judges have implemented just the dispositions of the civil code for defamation, the prevailing opinion was that decriminalization of defamation can be completed by removing it as a criminal offense, included in the criminal code, punishable by fine. "I believe the problem should not be left to the will of judges and that defamation should no longer be a penal offense and regulated only by the civil code," said Nushi.

In 2015, media outlets reported a deterioration of access to information from the public institutions. According to the panelists, the approval of the law on access to information and public institutions in October 2014 caught the government and administration unprepared. Accessing information is also difficult in areas undergoing radical administrative reform. According to the law, about 80 percent of information must be available for journalists and citizens, without the need to demand it. However, the information offices do not respond adequately even to requests from journalists. According to Lani, "Providing information continues to be considered a privilege, rather than a legal obligation punishable by law for those that do not implement it."

Yet, the commissioner for the Right to Information issued a public statement asserting that there were only about 300 complaints in 2015. According to the commissioner's website, there were 46 decisions in 2015, some of which imposed fines. One of the obligations the law imposed was that until spring 2015 the ministries and institutions should be prepared to implement the law; otherwise, their officials would be fined. However, according to Dervishi, "The institution of the Commissioner on the Right to Information and Personal Data Protection does not have a website that meets all standards the law requires!"

Albanian media are not deprived of the right to access news or news sources and reprint or rebroadcast them in foreign or native languages. The only persistent problem, as in previous years, is the failure to implement standards when it comes to the sanctity of intellectual property.

Entry into the journalism profession remains free and unobstructed by the government.

## OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

Albania Objective Score: 2.49

The panel displayed strong criticism toward professional standards and concluded that journalism in Albania only partially fulfills accepted norms. “There is a lot to improve in professional standards,” said Shpëtim Luku, a freelance journalist. This opinion resonated with other panelists, too. According to Basha, “Each year we notice that the quality of news and information in the media is deteriorating, leading to weaker professional standards.”

According to other panelists, the state of reporting is even worse in local media. Yzeiri believes this decline stems mainly from the fact that in many districts the mayors are on their second or third term in a row. This has strengthened their power and put more pressure on the media. As an example, the panelists mentioned the city of Elbasan: the mayor controls two local television stations, which broadcast news only on the municipality’s successes, and the true range of problems concerning the citizens never appears. “My impression is that some local media have regressed, looking increasingly like the newspapers and television stations of the communist period,” said Yzeiri.

Dervishi also said that journalists and media are increasingly giving up on the principle of verifying the news from two sources. “Currently there is no careful reporting from journalists, and you really miss seeing news stories that have two sources in them, which indicates a decline in journalism,” he said.

### 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 and retain qualified personnel within the media profession.
- > 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 exist (investigative, economics/business, local, political).

However, Valbona Kurti, a journalist with the ABC News television station, said the situation is not so gloomy. According to her, biased reporting is more visible in political news, while in other fields, such as economics or crime reporting, the reporting is more balanced and professional. Nushi also viewed the situation as more mixed, with some media working to respect the standards but other media, often for lack of staff, violating the standards.

The panelists also pointed to the entrance into the media market of the non-profit Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) in March 2014 as a positive and encouraging development; the panelists perceive that BIRN, which specializes in investigative reporting and media monitoring, is raising the bar in terms of high-quality reporting.

In a paradoxical way, the panelists identified competition among media to be the first to convey the news—but only in terms of time, not quality—as one of the main threats to reporting standards. It seems that media do not suffer any consequences from reporting inaccurate news. On the contrary, it seems that untruthful news is more competitive and profitable than the truth. “Now it seems that for many media it is no longer important if the news is true or false; the only important thing is to be the first one to report it,” said Basha. Given the abandonment of the principle of verifying news in several sources, it often happens that some media convey false news, reported first in one medium, which leads to what one panelist defined as “a chain reaction, or avalanche of falsity.”

Another cause of lackluster standards stems from the hesitation of public institutions to provide full information. The panelists illustrated this phenomenon with the latest case of sea pollution along the coast of Durrës after an oil spill. Due to the lack of information from the port authorities, the media failed to accurately report which ship was responsible.

Political pressure on the media also lowers reporting standards, the panelists said. Making matters worse, some media owners have strong political ties, which has led to the emergence and cultivation of partisan journalists in the media, introducing another level of biased reporting.

A Code of Ethics exists and was approved long ago, but even though the standards are in place and are known and accepted by the media, they are not implemented sufficiently in daily practice. “Not even one day goes by when you don’t come across libel, offenses, and disdainful epithets, especially in comments or opinions of print media,” said Peçi.

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The problem is unmitigated by the fact that in Albania there is no institution similar to an order of journalists, which would demand the implementation of ethical standards in the media and sanction the respective punishment for repeat offenders.

The panelists overwhelmingly agree that self-censorship is a widespread practice with journalists, largely driven by the interests of media owners; journalists fear losing their jobs otherwise. "With regard to self-censorship, not only is it strong, but it is also legitimized. As long as you are working in an Albanian medium, you have to first become familiar with the interests of its owner and then draft your own agenda as a journalist, in accordance with these interests," said Luku. "Everybody is familiar with the interests of the owners and the 'minefields' which they are not supposed to tread on," added Kurti.

This opinion also coincides with the findings of a survey carried out by BIRN Albania, which included about 121 journalists and media managers. The survey concluded that owners' economic interests, their relation to politics, and a lack of financial sustainability are among the main causes that breed censorship and self-censorship. More than 70 percent of people involved in BIRN Albania's survey said they believe that journalists in Albania avoid covering certain news. The journalists involved in the study also ranked big commercial advertisers, as well as public and state advertisers, as another factor that adds to the pressure against media outlets' editorial policy. Journalists are also experiencing increasing pressure from organized crime, which also fuels self-censorship.

All of the above-mentioned factors affect journalists' decisions to avoid certain news and publish biased reporting, including positive reporting or thinly veiled advertising for financial partners. This has also led to a reluctance to undertake investigative journalism.

Aside from self-censorship, journalists and media are free to cover almost any news. This is especially true for the capital, Tirana, but also for other main cities, where there are correspondents of the larger media, which have national coverage. News reporting seems to be weaker in remote territories, where transportation and other means of communication are lacking.

Journalists' salaries are insufficient to pursue an adequate living standard and remove temptation for bribes, but the panelists could not identify any specific cases of such abuses. Apart from the fact that salaries are rather low, with the exception of a few big media outlets, journalists

do not receive any per diem when traveling outside their city of residence. "Salaries of journalists are such that they discourage careers in journalism," said Dervishi. This is also the reason why, as Peçi noted, high-quality journalists leave the field for politics or other professions.

Meanwhile, the failure to pay journalists for long periods is now a chronic disease, afflicting almost all media. According to the UGSH, 80 percent of journalists receive their salaries with a delay of 2–5 months. Out of 23 daily newspapers, only four respect timely payment of salaries. Out of 72 television stations, only 10 pay salaries promptly; out of 71 radio stations, 63 delay salary payments.

Sadly, the UGSH also notes that only 42 percent of journalists have a regular work contract. It is precisely these economic difficulties and the job conditions that pave the way for self-censorship by journalists.

As in previous years, the panelists said that news programs have eroded, to some extent, the weight of entertainment programs thanks to the emergence of a number of stations that work only as news channels. This reporting seems more balanced at big television stations with national coverage. Nonetheless, they tend to copy one another in a format that blends news and entertainment.

The situation concerning technical facilities and technology in the media is mixed, with both positive and negative examples. There are television stations with ultra-modern studios and contemporary digital technology, such as Top Channel, TV Klan, Ora News, and Vizion Plus, based in the capital. Meanwhile, many television and radio stations in the districts operate on improvised premises.

As a result of financial difficulties, field reporters and photographers are becoming an out-of-reach luxury. Online media subscriptions are nonexistent, while newspaper subscriptions have proved unsuccessful.

Private media appear to be more advanced than the public broadcaster with regard to investigative journalism. However, investigations generally remain superficial, especially in coverage of the economy, education, and health.

There are two television programs, *Fiks Fare* and *Stop*, which focus on investigative journalism, mainly using secret cameras. They belong to the private Top Channel and Klan. They have succeeded in unmasking corrupt practices in public offices, the public healthcare sector, public tendering, custom points, etc. However, such investigative journalism does not exist at public television.



### OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

Albania Objective Score: 2.62

News sources are numerous and diverse, spanning the whole political spectrum. By comparing the different media, citizens can arrive at a more objective truth; as Yzeiri said, “[In Albania] citizens become well informed through media pluralism rather than by the objectivity of a specific media outlet.”

The number of media outlets is abundant. In fact, according to the panelists, Albania’s market is too small to sustain the relatively large number of newspapers. Many of these newspapers would have shut down long ago, especially given the economic crisis, but they limp along thanks to owner subsidies, as well as by reducing expenses and keeping a low number of staff and journalists. All of these factors unavoidably affect the quality of reporting negatively.

Still, there is a great diversity of media. A recent phenomenon is the large penetration of media (newspapers, television stations, radio stations) through applications in mobile telephony, which also results from the rapid spread of Internet technology. It can safely be said that online media outlets are the only variety of media that continue to expand, with every newspaper or television station adding a web or online version. In fact, declining circulation can be attributed to the growing tendency of some readers to favor the electronic version of newspapers.

#### MULTIPLE NEWS SOURCES PROVIDE CITIZENS WITH RELIABLE, OBJECTIVE NEWS.

##### PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES INDICATORS:

- > Plurality of public and private news sources (e.g., print, broadcast, Internet, mobile) exist and offer multiple viewpoints.
- > Citizens’ access to domestic or international media is not restricted by law, economics, or other means.
- > State or public media reflect the views of the political spectrum, are nonpartisan, and serve the public interest.
- > Independent news agencies gather and distribute news for media outlets.
- > Private media produce their own news.
- > Transparency of media ownership allows consumers to judge the 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
- > The media provide news coverage and information about local, national, and international issues.

After being hit strongly by the multiplication of commercial television stations in the first two decades of transition, in the third decade the press is dealing with the blow of Internet competition. Twitter and YouTube are also being widely used to disseminate news, but Facebook is the prevailing instrument in this regard. Consequently, social networks are very active in stirring commentary on news and political developments in the country.

Albania has gone through a massive emigration in the more than two decades that followed the fall of communism. It is estimated that about one-third of the country’s population before the transition now lives abroad. Emigrants rely most heavily on the Internet and services such as Skype and Vibe to communicate with their relatives in Albania. Social networks, such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and other Internet communication channels, are uncensored.

There are no hindrances of a political nature, such as limitations or prohibitions from the government for citizens to use different media. The only challenges that persist relate to economic hardship and the lack of infrastructure in some places. There are social strata that cannot afford the services of commercial media through digital or cable platforms or Internet services.

The economic and infrastructural obstacles also explain the situation of the print media market and press distribution. It is now a well-known fact that rural areas lack almost all access to daily news (with the exception of the daily press reviews in television and radio stations), as newspapers are not distributed in these areas. Despite considerable improvements to rural road networks, economic strain keeps press distribution agencies from expanding their distribution area.

Inhabitants of remote and mountainous areas also have limited access to media sources, since the Internet has not yet penetrated in these areas due to the high cost—and low profit expectations of poor areas, which are also being deserted rapidly. Rural areas face another limitation in the unreliable supply of electricity.

No foreign media are blocked or censored in Albania. In this case, affordability is really the only hindrance for Albanian citizens.

Albanian public radio and television (RTSH) is legally dependent on Albania’s parliament and is financed by the state budget and advertising revenue. In the 25 years since communism fell, RTSH has never managed to become a true public television station. “Public television has served and will continue to serve the winning party or coalition of parties every time,” said Peçi, expressing the unanimous opinion of the panel. As noted before, in 2015 the new RTSH steering council failed to elect its new general director

because of the inability of its members—representatives of parliamentary political parties—to achieve a consensus.

However, the panel agreed that currently RTSH is also open to opposition points of view. At the same time, the broadcasting of government success clearly consumes the bulk of news programming, and bias in favor of every incumbent government is also evident.

Public media continue to have serious shortcomings in addressing social or cultural problems that commercial media neglect. Even though RTSH is a television station with funding of up to €14 million per year, it still does not have its own flagship program. “Public media are the only media that are regressing, while the other commercial media are progressing in spite of difficulties,” said Dervishi.

In Albania, there are no news agencies in the classical sense of the term. The state news agency ATSH still exists, but it is ineffective and almost utterly abandoned by domestic media. However, there are websites and portals self-labeled as news agencies. These include the National News Agency (NOA), which also publishes news in English, and KMA News. These “agencies” publish news on their websites and survive thanks to advertising they sell based on the number of visitors or clicks. It is difficult to distinguish between these and newspaper or television websites. According to an AMI report, NOA publishes news from Albania, Kosovo, and Macedonia. The report states that the website offers a variety of news and topics, similar to daily newspapers and generalist media, which lack a specific target. The report states, “These sections are updated continuously and subscription is free.”

For many years now Albanian media, mainly those based in the capital, can afford and regularly receive information on world developments from Reuters, AP, AFP, etc.

The largest newspapers in the country and the private television stations produce their own news. In many cases, it is difficult to tell if a media outlet has produced its own news or has copied it from other media. The differences in news from one media outlet to the next relate more to political slant.

An increasingly popular phenomenon is the growing dependence on news and information served by authorities and institutions through press conferences, spokespersons, or press releases. A recent study carried out by the journalism department of the University of Tirana shows that 80 percent of news in the media flows from public-relations departments. According to the panelists, this development is not very healthy, as it risks turning the media into a propaganda loudspeaker for the government and political parties.

Even though there is a legal obligation to register media ownership, like all other businesses, at the National Center

of Registration, the panelists agreed that this does not guarantee ownership transparency. This is because quite a few media owners register the ownership in the name of other persons, relatives, or friends—thus, there is a distinction between real and formal ownership of television stations. Despite this discrepancy, the public is aware of who are the real media owners. “Institutions such as the AMA, which must guarantee genuine media transparency, have not carried out this mission, even though they could,” said Basha.

There are no media monopolies to report. Albanian law requires a national television station to have at least three shareholders. However, according to the panelists, there have been attempts to establish monopolies in the media, as with an unsuccessful bid related to digital platforms.

The panelists noted only one negative development in 2015 regarding foreign investment in Albanian media, related to the investment into Agon Channel by the Italian businessman Francesco Beccheti. The television station entered the market a few years ago, offering very high salaries for journalists. Last year it shut down, with Albanian prosecutors accusing Beccheti of money laundering and tax evasion.

There are no government tendencies in Albania to obstruct media reporting of issues related to minorities, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation. According to Peçi, “Both religious faiths and minorities with different sexual orientation are covered in different media.” However, other panelists see a less rosy picture. Nushi pointed to cases of media indifference to the problems of minorities with a different sexual orientation, and instances of racist language in stories related to vulnerable groups, such as Roma or LGBT people.

According to an AMI survey, public television in Gjirokastra broadcasts part of its programs in Greek. The same is true with the public radio station in Korça, which also broadcasts in Macedonian. Other panelists admitted that much more should be done for some minorities. “Some television programs have been created for the Roma, but we are still far from the standards required by the Council of Europe,” said Lani. Those standards include the creation of special programs dedicated permanently to the problems of such minority groups as Greeks, Macedonians, Montenegrins, Arumuns, and Roma, regarding their rights, education, and culture.

Information on global developments is abundant and available without any limitations. Media based in the capital and in some of the biggest cities tend to focus on problems of national interest, while local media tend to pay greater attention to local events, even though they also follow national developments. The national media usually cover local events, especially in cases related to politics and crime reporting.

## OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

### Albania Objective Score: 2.11

The difficult circumstances of the ongoing economic crisis have forced media to intensify their efforts to improve internal management, such as planning expenses for the staff, technology, or programming based on specific financing sources. These efforts have enabled them not only to survive, but also to improve their financial situation.

Even though all media are feeling the pinch, there are two different landscapes. Print media are rapidly shrinking, a fate befalling small television stations in the districts as well. Meanwhile, the larger national and local television stations, based in the capital, have survived and invested heavily in technology; for example, Top Channel, one of the biggest commercial stations, rolled out news studios featuring the most modern technology.

The panel described the print situation in tragic terms. According to Peçi, the press is meeting a slow death, and “there is not even a chance for any newspaper in Albania to live only through its revenue, such as advertising or sales, without extra financial support.” The panelists generally agree that all newspapers are essentially on life support—in the form of owner subsidies.

Now all newspapers have their own website, another indicator of their increasingly electronic future. For the moment, however, online expansion not only leads to a loss of readers and hurts print sales, but it also bumps up operational costs. “We have four people employed in the newspaper’s online

department, which has increased our expenses by 15 percent,” said Peçi, who is also the finance director of *Shqip*, one of the country’s best-known newspapers.

According to the latest media reports, newspaper circulation has decreased drastically. Newspapers that used to have a circulation of about 10,000 copies now distribute just 1,000 copies per day, selling only a few hundred of those.

Revenue sources for newspapers, as well as for media in general, are dwindling. The main advertising sources include service companies, such as mobile phone companies, insurance companies, or car sales companies. The same clients are known to exert pressure aimed at silencing the media. Peçi illustrated this with the case of Vodafone, which has refused to buy advertisements in *Shqip* in protest over some of the paper’s coverage. This example shows that in the context of economic crisis, powerful clients can use advertising as a tool to pressure the media. In this way, companies tend to buy not just the audience of a media outlet, but the whole media outlet.

Advertising is a relatively developed sector, especially for national television, and is widely used by the media. The advertising market is estimated to be about €34 million per year, and the greatest share by far—about €29–€30 million—still goes to television stations. According to an AMI study in 2014, print media received only 7.8 percent of the advertising, while 78 percent went to television.

Even within the television sector, there is significant polarization. Only the three largest commercial stations (TV Klan, Top Channel, and Vizion Plus) received 77 percent of the advertising spent on television, while the rest of the stations took only 23 percent. This is an indicator that sheds light on the phenomenon of concentration in the media industry.

However, the panelists seemed to agree that the number of newspapers and television stations remains too high, given the size of the Albanian market. According to Dervishi, many newspapers work with very reduced staff, which explains why the product is not genuine journalism but is rather lifted from Facebook, stolen from television, or drawn from ministry press releases. Lani said that given the severe economic crisis, a lack of bankruptcy proceedings in the media is abnormal. In Albania, Lani said, a strange kind of capitalism without bankruptcy is in place. “No media shut down, no media die—that is why we have cacophony instead of media pluralism,” he said.

Advertising fees vary from one media outlet to another and also depend on the agency. However, the advertising sector continues to operate in a non-secure climate. There are no stable rules on the deadlines and modalities for paying for advertising, which also affects the liquidity of stations and

### MEDIA ARE WELL-MANAGED ENTERPRISES, ALLOWING EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE.

#### BUSINESS MANAGEMENT INDICATORS:

- > Media outlets operate as efficient and self-sustaining enterprises.
- > 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.
- > Government subsidies and advertising are distributed fairly, governed by law, and neither subvert editorial independence nor distort the market.
- > Market research is used to formulate strategic plans, enhance advertising revenue, and tailor the product to the needs and interests of the audience.
- > Broadcast ratings, circulation figures, and Internet statistics are reliably and independently produced.

leads to delays in payment of salaries for journalists and staff. Subscriptions to print media are found only within the state administration; private subscriptions do not exist.

Advertising spots are broadcast mainly in the middle of programs, movies, documentaries, and television shows, but they cannot interrupt news editions.

In Albania, there have never been state subsidies for the media. The panelists viewed this as a negative; they were critical of the fact that successive governments have not considered any initiative to assist newspapers with the difficult situation in which they find themselves. "Even a large newspaper such as *Le Monde* managed to survive, thanks to government support," said Luku.

Even though it is accepted that print media are part of the national culture, nothing is done to support them. In previous years, the lack of government subsidies has been perceived as a sign of newspapers' independence. However, the lack of subsidies is now seen as indifference. "It is similar to the indifference in front of a drowning person, when you fail to offer a life preserver," said Nushi.

Even though the law does not favor any one media in particular, the distribution of advertising from public institutions continues to generally be done on the basis of political clientelism. More advertising is offered to those media that provide greater guarantees that their editorial policies will support the incumbent government. The panel highlighted the case of the Ministry of Health, which has channeled advertising mainly to media close to the government. According to Basha, "The decrease of public funds for advertising due to the crisis has led to a situation where even those few funds available are channeled by the government to the most obedient media."

Although the advertising market is chaotic to a degree, there are some attempts to measure and research the market. With regard to newspapers and magazines, there is greater awareness of the preferences and social groups (mainly the older generations) that remain loyal to print

In Albania, Lani said, a strange kind of capitalism without bankruptcy is in place. "No media shut down, no media die—that is why we have cacophony instead of media pluralism," he said.

media. Meanwhile, there are no studies on how newspapers can address and win over young people, who are quickly abandoning reading the press and prefer to access online sources of information.

Newsrooms keep track of statistics. Some of them are reliable, but some have been doctored and do not reflect reality. The circulation of newspapers and magazines is still not public, mainly with the aim of not discouraging advertisers (yet another symptom of the drastic decrease in circulation), although it is not difficult to find out the figures.

The number of clicks and the degree of debate that news or articles generate in their forums serve as a measuring unit for the online versions of offline media (websites of newspapers and television stations.) It is obvious that a small part of advertising now also goes to online media. According to a statement of the UGSH, in Albania as of 2014 there are about 250 online newspapers and websites, which seem to have hired over 350 journalists. Meanwhile, only 50 of these newspapers and websites have a modest system of salaries, while the rest remain as informal entities.

Television stations have continued to base their work on some international and domestic companies that deal with market research and audience studies. The hosts of the most popular programs, such as *Opinion* and *Top Story*, carefully follow the audience data measured by some company through people meters and make the necessary adjustments to fit their audiences' preferences.

## OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

Albania Objective Score: 2.72

Associations of media publishers and owners, such as the Association of Electronic Media, have existed for a long time, but their ability to lobby the government or parliament is almost nonexistent. The poor performance of such organizations cannot be explained by some legal limitation or interference by from government. As the panel concluded, the organizations' lack of influence results from the fact that media, especially print media, do not function as genuine businesses. In most cases, they are individual initiatives of owners and not missionaries of free speech, and they are linked to the media because of the profit they can make.

Mutual relations between the media owners are also poor, and membership-based organizations are out of the question. Practice has shown that there is a kind of weak solidarity between them when a phenomenon that threatens what they perceive to be "the common interest" appears.

There are journalists' associations that, according to the panel, remain dormant most of the time. However, they came to life in November 2015, as three of these organizations (the Union of Albanian Journalists, the Association of Professional Journalists, and the League of Journalists of Albania) published a joint public statement critical of the government initiative to amend the defamation law, as described in Objective 1.

### SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS FUNCTION IN THE PROFESSIONAL INTERESTS OF INDEPENDENT MEDIA.

#### SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS INDICATORS:

- > Trade associations represent the interests of media owners and managers and provide member services.
- > Professional associations work to protect journalists' rights and promote quality journalism.
- > NGOs support free speech and independent media.
- > Quality journalism degree programs exist providing substantial practical experience.
- > Short-term training and in-service training institutions and programs allow journalists to upgrade skills or acquire new skills.
- > Sources of media equipment, newsprint, and printing facilities are apolitical, not monopolized, and not restricted.
- > Channels of media distribution (kiosks, transmitters, cable, Internet, mobile) are apolitical, not monopolized, and not restricted.
- > Information and communication technology infrastructure sufficiently meets the needs of media and citizens.

Last autumn, a group of journalists started an initiative to establish a "Council of Media." According to the founders, the "Council" will be an independent organization of Albanian journalists that aims to increase professional journalism standards in Albania by fostering implementation of a Code of Ethics by print, audiovisual, and online media.

Immediately after its foundation, the "Council of Media" signed an agreement of cooperation with the AMA. AMA's press release states that the final aim of this agreement is to preserve plurality and democracy in broadcast media and to strengthen their professional standards.

Similar to previous years, the UGSH, an organization founded years ago with the support of USAID, has again proved the most active. According to Dervishi, "the Union has been more vocal by raising the problem of delayed salaries, job contracts, and social security for journalists." Although its membership has expanded in all districts, it has been difficult for the Union to collect membership fees. This has made it impossible to accumulate a fund to support journalists in need (for health-related problems, for example), and the Union has been forced to appeal to journalists or businesses for contributions.

The panel concluded that NGOs have contributed in the past and continue to assist media freedom. Their voice has been heard both for the protection of specific journalists and for the media in general. Peçi said, "Even associations for the protection of environment, cultural heritage, and student associations have been active in supporting media and their freedom." However, the most outspoken has been the Albanian Helsinki Committee, which has never failed to raise its voice every time journalists' freedom to perform their professional duties has been restrained

According to Yzeiri, while universities such as those in Tirana, Shkodra, and Elbasan, offer programs for preparing journalists, student interest is weak. "Salaries in journalism are not more competitive than other sectors, and students choose either to go abroad or to work in other professions," he said. However, the panel agreed that journalists who attend one-year courses abroad generally return to their workplace and make valuable contributions.

The economic crisis also has affected training for journalists. "There are fewer trainings, and the diminishing of donors due to the crisis has led to a situation where there are fewer programs," said Lani. It seems that due to the pressure, the media prioritize work that neglects journalism standards rather than training that improves the standards. According to Kurti, it is unthinkable for the media to pay for the training of journalists. Moreover, even when free



training sessions are organized—as in the case of AMI, which continues to be the main contributor to short-term training—there must be negotiations with newsroom editors, as reduced staff makes it difficult for one journalist to miss work for one or two days.

There are no limitations on the import or purchase of materials necessary for the work of media and journalists. However, technology and infrastructure further weaken the position of print media. One of the weakest links remain the printing houses, where a monopoly situation exists, and the technology used is backward. The machinery has depreciated, and advanced rotary printing presses are lacking. The distribution of newspapers is limited to urban areas and daily newspapers do not reach rural areas, where nearly half of the Albanian population lives.

Penetration in the fixed-line and broadband sectors remains very low by European standards, and there are opportunities for further investment in network upgrades to help propel the country's economic growth through digital offerings and IP-based technologies and services. On the other hand, poor fixed-line infrastructure has encouraged consumers to use mobile devices, and Albania now boasts one of the highest mobile penetration rates in Europe.

The panel identified as a great shortcoming the fact that the transition from analogue to digital broadcasting has not taken place yet. According to Bregu, "Transition to digital broadcasting is an essential process not only because Albania committed to complete it by June 17, 2015, but also due to the fact that such a technology would radically improve the quantity and quality of information."

## List of Panel Participants

**Anila Basha**, editor in chief, News Bomb, Tirana

**Bajram Peçi**, director, *Shqip*, Tirana

**Bledi Gila**, vice editor-in-chief, *Shqip*, Tirana

**Genci Demiraj**, station owner, Amantia Television, Vlorë

**Ilda Londo**, specialist, Albanian Media Institute, Tirana

**Ilir Yzeiri**, journalist; professor of journalism, University of Elbasan, Elbasan

**Iva Seseri**, lawyer, Albanian Parliament, Tirana

**Lutfi Dervishi**, freelance journalist, Tirana

**Milton Nushi**, media advisor, Government of Albania's Ombudsman, Tirana

**Remzi Lani**, director, Albanian Media Institute, Tirana

**Shkelqim Bylykbashi**, chairman, Albanian Media Club, Lushnja

**Shpëtim Luku**, freelance economic journalist, Tirana

**Valbona Kurti**, journalist, ABC News, Tirana

**Zylyftar Bregu**, professor of journalism, University of Tirana; member, Audiovisual Media Authority, Tirana

## Moderator & Author

**Andrea Stefani**, project coordinator, freelance media analyst, Tirana

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