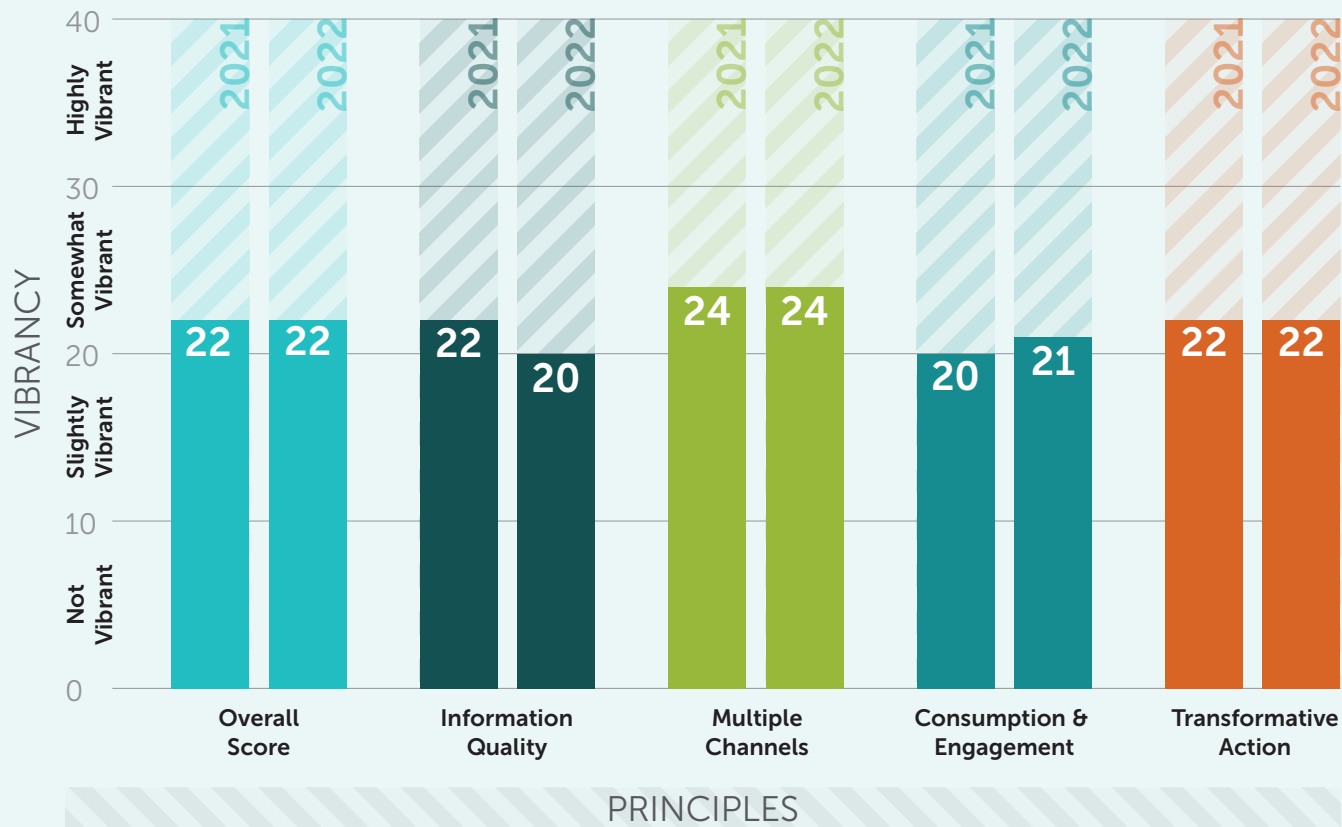


ALBANIA

Vibrant Information Barometer

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Highly Vibrant (31-40): Quality information is widely available in this country. People have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information; they recognize and reject misinformation.

Somewhat Vibrant (21-30): Quality information is available in this country and most of it is editorially independent, based on facts, and not intended to harm. Most people have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information, although some do not. Most people recognize and reject misinformation, although some do not.

Slightly Vibrant (11-20): Quality information is available on a few topics or geographies in this country, but not all. While some information is editorially independent, there is still a significant amount of misinformation, malinformation, and hate speech in circulation, and it does influence public discourse. Most people do not recognize or reject misinformation.

Not Vibrant (0-10): Quality information is extremely limited in this country. The vast majority of it is not editorially independent, not based on facts, or it is intended to harm. People do not have the rights, means, or capacity to access a wide range of information; they do not recognize or reject misinformation; and they cannot or do not make choices on what types of information they want to engage with.

Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL
SCORE

22

In Albania's general elections, held on April 2021, the Socialist Party maintained its ruling majority in the parliament and handed Edi Rama his third consecutive term as prime minister. Opposition parties contested the election results, citing claims of attempts to buy votes and misuse of public resources. According to international monitoring reports, media coverage betrayed slight tendencies to present one side more positively than the other, and the practice continued of party-produced broadcasting footage reported as news.

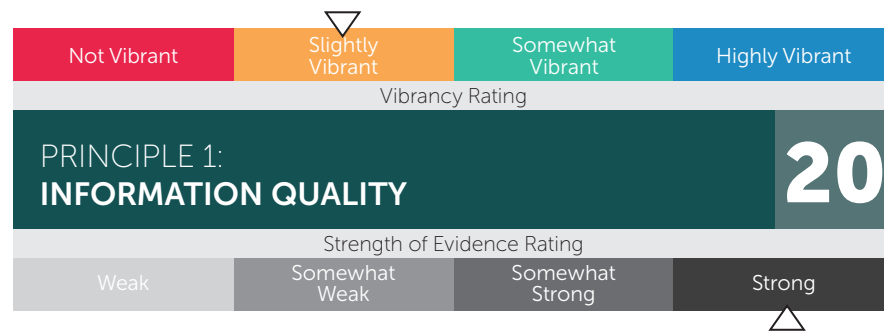
Over 2021, the majority party alleged that Albania's president, Ilir Meta, overstepped his role, following several statements that he made during the electoral campaign and overstepping his constitutional role. In June 2021, the parliament voted to impeach the president, referring also to undue involvement in the elections. In February 2022, the Constitutional Court decided against the parliamentary impeachment, arguing that the president's actions did not amount to serious violations of the constitution.

Apart from political changes, developments related to the COVID-19 pandemic also proved important, with implications in the media sphere as well. Although the vaccination process proceeded quickly, a segment of the population was reluctant to get vaccinated against COVID-19. Disinformation and widespread conspiracy theories certainly played a part in this reluctance.

The panel made a clear distinction between the existing infrastructure in the media landscape and the

quality of reporting and information. While access to media, existence of numerous media channels, and infrastructure overall are rather satisfactory, reporting, fact-checking, and verification of information process are not strong. Economic pressure on the media remains, frequently pushing outlets to prioritize commercialism and undermining the quality and independence of their reporting. Albanian legislation does not present any major problems and generally guarantees the right to freedom of media. However, in practice journalists habitually practice self-censorship as a result of both internal and external conditions in the media.

Access to media and existence of multiple media sources are readily available. However, concentration of the media market has increased in recent years, while qualitative and independent reporting is not widespread. In the last years, there has been some progress made regarding initiatives related to media literacy, but this is a long-term process that needs time to show any improvement in the media literacy skills among the population. There is also no evidence that government decision-making is based on quality information or in adequate and serious communication with the citizens. While there is ample opportunity for disseminating information through multiple channels, its quality and independence often remains questionable. Non-profit media, which do not suffer political or economic influence, tend to invest in their journalism and engage more in professional and independent reporting.



Albania has a sufficient infrastructure in place for producing quality information, but this does not necessarily translate into quality coverage. The VIBE panelists most frequently mentioned problems related to political propaganda transferring from social networks to the media space and the overall trend of publishing information without verifying sources, checking facts, or providing necessary context. Online media continue to be especially problematic, tending to emphasize quick publication of news without verification. Their habit of copying/pasting from other outlets further amplifies the veracity problems. In this context, media clearly are not immune to misinformation, and violations bring no professional consequences — leaving little hope for improvement in this regard. The panelists gave a high score to the indicator assessing available information on a broad variety of topics, owing mainly to the information collection infrastructure in place and the existence of multiple information sources. On the other hand, panelists gave the lowest score to the indicator gauging resource sufficiency for content production. The advertising market has stagnated, with most of the ads going to just a handful of media outlets. This disparity puts heavy economic pressure on the rest, which undermines the quality of work and compromises editorial independence.

Indicator 1: There is quality information on a variety of topics available.

The panelists agreed that the infrastructure in place for producing news and information ranges from satisfactory to highly appropriate for some media outlets. Panelists also highlighted Albania's journalism schools, other training institutions, and media-development nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that offer various media training programs. A few panelists pointed out that access to training opportunities or news infrastructure diminishes once outside the capital.

With regard to assessing the quality of information, specifically its reliability and independence, the panelists agreed that media need to focus much more on this goal. Some panelists drew a distinction between the quality of information offered by non-profit media outlets, which receive donor support, and media outlets with particular political or economic interests. Overall, the panelists have found the editorial independence of information lacking — a trend they said has worsened throughout the years.

Furthermore, the panelists noted, violators of the media profession's ethical norms face no consequences, despite attempts to improve ethical standards. "There is an improvement in ethics, having in mind always the professional media, but there is no accountability in the cases when you do not hold up ethical standards, do not respect accuracy, verification of news, etc.," said Aleksander Cipa, head of the Union of Albanian Journalists.

In general, the panelists agreed that journalists have considerable information sources to draw upon, but the information is not necessarily strong, nor is editorial freedom. "While sources of information are numerous, the problem is in the quality of information conveyed, in the verification of sources, editorial independence, [and] in media failing to hold politics accountable," said Ornela Liperi, director of *Monitor*. Another panelist also noted that pressure — from politicians as well as businesses — often undermines journalist efforts to report objectively.

Indicator 2: The norm for information is that content is based on facts.

The panelists felt strongly that misinformation continued to proliferate, especially against the background of the COVID-19 pandemic. “This indicator has worsened with the pandemic; the editorial filters have disappeared, and in national television we see all the time proponents of conspiracy theories, which has affected the way the public has reacted towards the vaccination process,” said Aleksandra Bogdani, an investigative journalist with BIRN Albania.

Liperi commented on the trend of spreading purported news, commenting, “Most of the time, we see publication of press statements, notifications, or Facebook statuses served as news, and the media state that this is the responsibility of people publishing these statements, so sometimes there is not even an effort to produce news content.”

Journalists also criticized authorities for failing to make timely updates to information from official websites. One panelist pointed out that media not only fail to hold officials accountable — they also let the government feed information to journalists.

Other panelists agreed that the scope of misinformation is very problematic but emphasized some positive developments to consider. Albania now has a fact-checking organization — even though it is a limited bulwark against the spread of misinformation. Emirjon Senja, editor of the online section of ABC News TV, raised the example of Facebook and other social networks that have imposed stricter rules on misinformation due to the pandemic. “Even though these were global initiatives, many media reflected before posting information, once their information was blocked as unverified by these platforms, and this has been positive,” he said.

Other panelists also noted that a distinction should be drawn when judging the content of news programs compared to current-affairs

debates or entertainment programs. Serious television stations, and some online media run by journalists, have attempted to uphold efforts to verify information. Entertainment programs, however, have abused that standard — often inviting conspiracy theorists to speak and failing to debunk any of the theories they spout.

Indicator 3: The norm for information is that content is not intended to harm.

The panelists generally agreed that journalists do not deliberately aim to disinform their audiences or to engage in hate speech. However, mal-information and hate speech make their way into media content through other sources. “Online media [are] a big problem in terms of ethics and hate speech, and social networks are an even bigger problem. However, we cannot claim that Albanian TV stations are serious producers of hate speech, like they are in neighboring countries,” said Remzi Lani, director of Albanian Media Institute.

The panelists identified politicians in particular as major drivers of hate speech, propaganda, and disinformation. While media do not intentionally start or engage in such efforts, they do become vehicles of such phenomena. “We can mention propaganda, which does not aim to educate or inform the population, but also the derogative language used by politicians and government, especially against journalists, women, or other politicians,” Bogdani commented.

Panelists differed on the extent to which foreign governments spread information and propaganda in Albanian media. A few panelists mentioned that several small, peripheral online media are clearly financed by foreign sources and spread propaganda. These outlets are mainly online media, which face no professional consequences for their actions. Their size and non-influential status speaks to the limitations of such attempts to manipulate Albanian media and society.

“While sources of information are numerous, the problem is in the quality of information conveyed, in the verification of sources, editorial independence, [and] in media failing to hold politics accountable,” said Liperi.

Indicator 4: The body of content overall is inclusive and diverse.

The panel was divided on whether media and informational content produced in 2022 is sufficiently inclusive and diverse. Some panelists claimed that diversity and gender balance are of least concern to media outlets, while other panelists said they have seen no major problems in that respect. “From our data, there is general gender balance in audiovisual media, but female staff is underrepresented at management or top levels. The same is true for the data we have on the percentage of speakers on TV panels, even though that depends greatly on the topic,” said Arben Muka, director of programming at the Audiovisual Media Authority.

Other panelists pointed out the roles that the public broadcaster must play, considering its mission, legal obligations, and responsibility to provide content in sign language and programs on minorities. In addition, while panelists overall agreed that access to media of marginalized groups has continuously improved, they questioned the quality of coverage. “I agree that marginalized groups have enjoyed greater access, but usually it is for soft topics ... leaving out the background or the roots that the person interviewed represents,” said Klementina Cenckollari, editor of MCN TV. Still, most panelists viewed the media sector’s inclusivity in a positive light.

Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

Again in 2022, Albania’s media market has faced the core challenge of financing content production. The country’s advertising market struggles to sustain the large number of media outlets present. According to data collected by *Monitor*, the advertising market is estimated to be €40 million (\$42 million), with approximately 70 percent going to the three national television stations.

Furthermore, as one panelist noted, advertisers do not invest most

of this money in newsrooms or information but rather entertainment programs. Marketing agencies tend to focus on direct marketing through social media platforms instead of traditional media, further limiting the available sources. “The big television stations have tried to adapt to the context and have started to orient themselves more towards alternative revenue through YouTube ads and Instant Articles on Facebook; however, the revenue generated is negligible compared to the funding needs,” said Senja.

“From our data, there is general gender balance in audiovisual media, but female staff is underrepresented at management or top levels,” said Muka.

Members of the panel also discussed the extent of state advertising distributed for media outlets, and whether it is enough to distort the market. They agreed that the government distributes public funds to media, but funnels the support through specific government projects, rather than earmarking it as advertising. Thus,

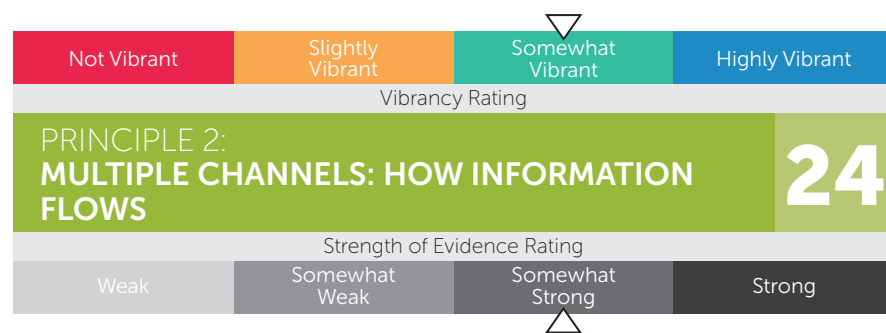
transparency is missing, according to the panelists, as the details are hard to track down, amid multiple projects used to channel funds to media outlets from the public budget. “We notice specific public agencies that buy a lot of advertisements, and no longer distinguish between editorial policy of the media, pro or against government. Rather, the big media get more money, and the smaller get less,” said Anila Basha, director of Newsbomb.

The panel noted that this tendency indicates that the practice of buying ads — from public and private advertisers — is not purely for advertising purposes; it is also a way of buying media silence.

The panel also highlighted new sources of media financing, which have grown stronger in recent years. A particularly positive development is an increase in donor support for investigative and independent journalists. The panelists said this investment has helped improve the quality of reporting and has encouraged journalists to be more active and independent.

However, journalists continue to experience delays in salary distribution and with double books on salaries and contributions. Cipa noted a slight

improvement among the continuing issues. “Twenty percent of media still face delays in disbursing salaries, even though the delays have decreased in duration. The problem where official salary is lower than what you earn, but the social contribution and benefits are also lower than what you deserve as a journalist also remains a huge problem,” he said. The situation is most dramatic for local media journalists, according to the panelists. These journalists sometimes try to take on two or more positions to compensate for the low salaries and payment delays.



Albania has a complex situation with the right to create, share, and consume information. On the one hand, the legislation in place is considered solid; on the other hand, journalists remain vulnerable and often resort to self-censorship. The panelists gave their highest scores to the indicator on the accessibility of multiple sources of information, arguing that citizens have a variety of resources available, and access and use of such sources is free of charge and without hindrances. Panelists noted the high legal standards of the law on public information, but said that its implementation has worsened, while information provided by the government tends to be one-sided. Despite the high number and various choices across the Albanian media landscape, it shows a clear tendency towards monopolies — especially

“Rather than direct forms of threats or fines, we [journalists] deal with indirect or hidden censorship, which appears in the form of benefits media owners are offered from the power and the connections they might have to politicians,” said Liperi.

in the television sector. The panel was most critical regarding the independence of information channels, giving the related indicator the lowest scores under Principle 2. Pressure from politicians, businesses, and the media owners themselves has greatly undermined editorial independence, frequently driving journalists to self-censorship. In this context, the panelists viewed the role of donor-funded media as positive, as they do not suffer the same restrictions on editorial independence.

Indicator 6: People have rights to create, share, and consume information.

Despite the panelists agreeing that Albania deserves optimal scores for the existing legal framework, real-world implementation of these laws drags down the scores. Some panelists noted the increasing tendency of aggressive behavior towards journalists, including hostility from the police and private citizens. In particular, the panelists described cases involving court and crime reporters, who are especially vulnerable to pressure from organized crime. “There are many journalists who work not only for media outlets, but on particular investigative projects, and I am aware of concrete cases involving numerous and serious threats,” said Bogdani — a view other panelists reinforced. “These threats might not be so visible in Tirana, but if you are in some particular cities, and if you happen to report on some delicate matters, such as organized crime, it is not easy at all,” said Cipa.

The panelists generally agreed that political coercion exists, but they said that it is exerted through media owners, not specifically on the journalists. “Rather than direct forms of threats or fines, we deal with indirect or hidden censorship, which appears in the form of benefits media owners are offered from the power and the connections they might have to politicians,” said Liperi. Another panelist underscored the attempts to politicize journalists’ work. “There is also a tendency to profile journalists as pro or against the power, and this worries me a lot, as it establishes a

kind of climate that leads to self-censorship — you refrain from posting on social networks, or stop from following a specific issue,” said Senja.

Indicator 7: People have adequate access to channels of information.

The Albanian media sphere offers numerous possibilities to access channels of information. The large number of televisions and radio stations, as well as newspapers and online media, create a variety of choices for people seeking information. Consumers face no legal or technical obstacles in accessing the internet, foreign media, or any other information sources. The panelists knew of no cases of the government or any institution blocking access to media.

Internet penetration has been increasing steadily, rising from 60 percent in 2016 to 73% by the end of 2021, according to the regulator of electronic communication. This agency enables the population to access news or other information via the internet. All panelists agreed that this indicator represents a point of strength, given the numerous possibilities for information and the ease of accessing these channels.

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

The panelists agreed that the high standards of existing regulations affect access to information and that access to such information has been more and more difficult over time. Global rankings, such as the Global Right to Information’s Rating Map, assess Albania’s law on access to official information as a strength, but this does not mean that its implementation by the institutions is guaranteed. “With each passing year, it seems that public institutions and agencies are increasingly indifferent to proper implementation of this law. Even though the law is very good, they skirt around it by providing information, but not the information

you requested,” Muka said — a tendency confirmed by other panelists. “The willingness to provide the required information often is lacking, and they attempt to provide the information that the institution wants you to have, not what you demanded,” said Liperi.

According to the panelists, spokespersons have done little to improve the situation. Instead of providing information for the media, these staffers’ main roles seem to be acting in the names of their superiors and performing public relations for their employers. “For many years now, spokespersons serve to distribute links and content ready for publication in media, rather than as a bridge between journalists and institutions,” said Senja.

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

In general, Albanian media companies experience no obstacles to establishment, apart from some requirements needed to secure an audio or audiovisual license. On the other hand, the panelists noted that the completion of the digital switchover and the distribution of licenses for digital platforms has rendered the regulation of media ownership almost irrelevant. “Media can be opened freely, and the awarding of licenses seems not to be problematic for the moment, due to digitalization,” said Lani.

However, the panelists noted that the media market shows a clear tendency towards media concentration and attempts to establish monop-

lies, further enabled by a 2016 amendment to ownership criteria for national audiovisual licenses.

On the question of transparency of ownership of media outlets, that information is available and freely accessed through the online register of business companies. However, online media are less transparent. They are not required to register, and there-

fore are not always listed in the business database. Funding for media outlets remains opaque.

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The panelists agreed, generally, that the public service broadcaster has demonstrated steady improvement. It offers a diversity of content, remains editorially independent, and has increased coverage of different cultural and social groups.

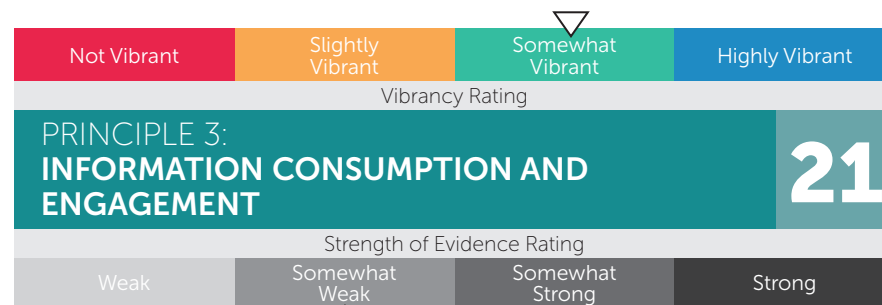
Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

The panel wholly agreed on the weak independence of information channels overall. Panelists said they believe that media owners' political and economic interests are clearly influencing coverage. This dynamic is heavily reflected in the lack of separation between newsrooms and marketing departments across the media sector. "Independence has always been problematic and almost does not exist, as the influence of owners is essential in all media," according to Bogdani. The panelists agreed that the lack of advertising revenue, along with the small media market, leave media vulnerable to owner pressure.

In contrast, the public media's financing is guaranteed by law through license fees, advertising, state funding, and other financial sources. According to the panelists, the public media do not enjoy special or privileged access to certain information, and other media experience no discrimination in this regard. Another positive feature is citizens' free access to the internet and other subscriptions.

The panelists were divided on the role of regulatory authorities regarding licenses. Some emphasized that the whole selection process of the regulator's members is politicized. One panelist cited the fact that the current chair used to be the spokesperson of the ruling party, considering that an indication of the level of political influence. Other panelists noted that so far, they have seen no flagrant decisions indicating political influence on license awards—but this is mostly because no licenses are currently available to be awarded.

“Albania is in a situation where public data are protected as if they were personal, while personal data are available for everyone to see, and this has become absurd,” said Bogdani.



The panelists agreed that the population is not highly prepared to assess the quality and truthfulness of information and the media they consume. The existing legal framework provides some protection regarding privacy, but only a small part of the population seems to be aware of the protections or versed in the use of security tools. Recent private-data leaks also exposed the risks inherent in this field. The panel was very critical regarding the media acting according to audience requests and needs and gave the lowest scores to the related indicator. The choice of channels of information is rather rich, and social networks are widely used, but the tendency to reinforce communication bubbles is also very strong. Additionally, Albanian media do not appear to prioritize audience needs or building trust with the public. Although community media is still underdeveloped, this indicator scored highly, along with the indicator of people productively engaging with the platforms at their disposal.

Indicator 11: People can safely use the internet due to privacy protections and security tools.

Albanian legislation does offer measures and regulations for protecting digital security and data privacy, through several laws and safeguarding institutions. However, 2021 saw two major leaks of the personal data of citizens, including personally identifying information such as salaries, official identification numbers, names, and dates of birth. These episodes

highlighted the importance of needing to protect personal data, and posed a big question mark on the current level of data security. “Albania is in a situation where public data are protected as if they were personal, while personal data are available for everyone to see, and this has become absurd,” said Bogdani.

Another problem, according to the panesplits, is that media companies tend to outsource to agencies or companies for the technical work of securing their platforms. Similarly, panelists noted that some media staff have received digital security training, but only in certain major media outlets.

According to Cipa, approximately 200 complaints on cybercrime have been registered from journalists all over Albania, but the police lack capacity to investigate. In addition, citizen awareness of these risks and the measures they can take for protection seems to be rather low.

Indicator 12: People have the necessary skills and tools to be media literate.

The government shows little interest in promoting media and information literacy. Panelists agreed that the greatest actors in media literacy are NGOs, which make various efforts to educate the public and youth in particular. Lani noted that in 2021, the Albanian Media Institute forged an agreement with the Minister of Education to offer media literacy as a course in 10 schools, as a pilot project. “Next year, we hope it will be introduced in both high schools and in the lower cycle. At the same time, we are also working with universities in this respect, and all of this has served to promote the concept of media literacy, even though this is just the beginning and much more remains to be done,” he said. In addition, IREX’s Learn to Discern program in Albania, funded by the U.S. Department of State, has authored an online media literacy course that is being promoted in schools and among other target groups.

The panelists agreed that media literacy skills among the population are far from optimal. Media and information literacy indexes, such as the Me-

“**Even though debate programs are numerous, the quality of the debate leaves much to be desired, and the hate speech is disturbing,” said Dervishi.**

dia Literacy Index produced by the Open Society Institute, continue to rank Albania among the lowest European countries in terms of preparedness in the media field. The situation with the pandemic, and especially with vaccinations, showed that people were not familiar with the concept of fact checking or critically assessing information, and they had a low protection threshold against fake news or manipulation of content.

Indicator 13: People engage productively with the information that is available to them.

Data are lacking on the population’s or journalists’ use of the right to information. While certain media and investigative program newsrooms apply the access law regularly, other journalists report feeling discouraged from using it, when they do not receive the information they require. The population generally exercises the right to free expression without problems, and without incurring any negative consequences. However, no data or other indicators are available on how often the population acts based on objective and factual information.

Albanian citizens have platforms for public debate, but panelists voiced little confidence in the efficiency. “Even though debate programs are numerous, the quality of the debate leaves much to be desired, and the hate speech is disturbing,” said Lutfi Dervishi, a Radio Televizioni Shqiptar journalist. In addition, other panelists noted that these programs manipulate public opinion by presenting some elements of disinformation, such as operating with half-truths. However, when it comes to interaction with the audience, many television or radio programs include communication by phone or through social media profiles, enabling citizens to express themselves, panelists claimed.

Indicator 14: Media and information producers engage with their audience’s needs.

The situation with audience rating measurements in Albania remains

problematic. The main television media companies measure television ratings, but the data's reliability is disputed, and media outlets do not publicly share the data. "The lack of proper audience measurement is a huge problem. Even when we have such measurement, the companies offer unreliable data, which tend to favor certain media, and this leads to faulty perceptions on audience trends and on the distortion of advertising and the overall market," said Muka.

The panelists largely agreed that media tend to produce sensational, rather than educational, programs. This situation has become even more marked in the last years, with the blooming of reality show formats and more television debates, which occur almost daily on most television stations. "Increasingly, we have seen that there is a trend towards vulgarization of the media product, usually justified by the motto that this is what the public wants, at a time when we need to distinguish between what public wants and what public needs," said Dervishi.

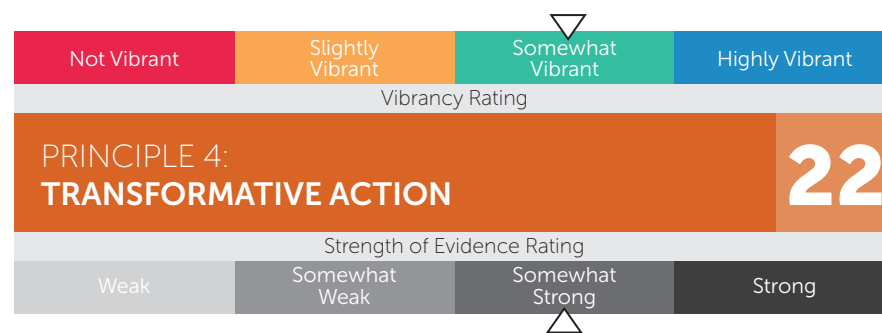
Other participants mentioned the commercial pressure on many media to produce this kind of programming, which is more successful financially. In addition, panelists pointed out that media practices generally do not include engaging with audience needs, or seeking out the particular interests of a target group through continuous research using scientific methods.

Indicator 15: Community media provides information relevant for community engagement.

The concept of community media remains elusive in Albania, and it is often confused with local media — even for some members of the panel, which demonstrates the relative novelty of this kind of media in the country.

According to the panelists, the possibilities to develop community media are rather scarce, despite a great need for this work. However, a few panelists reported some examples of Albanian community media, and see signs that the sector is growing stonger. Four community radio stations — serving the four main religious communities in the country — secured licenses under an audiovisual media law provision that allows communi-

ties to apply. Other panelists pointed to the emergence of other types of community media, mostly related to various ethnic groups. These are often in the realm of online media, given the lower operation costs. "There is an improvement, as now there are about 27 online media belonging to different ethnic communities — even communities that did not have any media outlets a year ago," said Cipa. While information is hard to locate on how these media operate, or how successful they are in their communities, the panelists agreed that they had not seen any instances of spreading disinformation.



The situation with channels of information is complex. While consumers have plenty of choice in terms of different channels, enabled by improved access and technology, information sources are rarely independent. As a result, quality reports are not the norm in Albanian media, and political propaganda easily drifts into the media space.

However, Albania has several civil society organizations that provide qualitative and reliable information. The extent of their influence is questionable. Some media outlets engage in professional and investigative reporting, but politicians or the governments respond only selectively, and sometimes minimize the reports. Furthermore, the quality of information received does not necessarily translate to impacts on the voting process or in curbing corruption. Panelists gave the lowest score to the indicator assessing the government's use of quality information in decision-making, while the highest score went to the indicator examining civil society's use of quality information.

Indicator 16: Information producers and distribution channels enable or encourage information sharing across ideological lines.

Media are often divided along political lines and affiliations, according to the panelists, which contributes to the polarization of society. However, a number of media present different points of view that are easily accessible to the public. The media landscape in Albania is quite vibrant, with a multitude of information channels available. An [IPSOS poll in 2021](#) revealed that television is still the most trusted and followed medium for the population, although social networks and online media have gained significant ground. Social networks, especially Facebook, are quite popular in Albania. Combined with additional channels that allow the public to provide feedback, such as radio and television programs, the public has opportunities to interact with the media and to exchange information.

The panelists claimed that, nonetheless, these forums and channels of interaction do not facilitate the sharing of information as much as serve as vehicles for insults and hate speech. “The exchange of information in social media is unregulated and unmoderated, and it follows the ideological lines of the commenters, who often troll those who do not agree with them,” said Valbona Sulce, a civil society activist.

Regarding the quality and independence of sources of information available, the panelists agreed that Albania has a broad range of sources, but only a few can be considered independent. Muka said that most people tend to rely on the channels that match their own ideological and political views, with little concern over whether the information is factual or independent. In this way, existing bubbles are reinforced — an effect further magnified by social networks.

At the same time, independent sources do exist, the panelists noted. They referred mainly to donor-supported media and projects. Even though these sources may not be widely known or followed by the population,

other media are often republish their stories, which multiplies the audience and eventually reaches a larger number of people.

Indicator 17: Individuals use quality information to inform their actions.

The panel was generally critical vis-a-vis this indicator. Quality information is not easily found, and even when it exists, it must compete with disinformation efforts to gain audiences’ attention. Several panelists emphasized the constant presence of conspiracy theories aired on prime-time national television. “The mass campaign for vaccination against

COVID-19 was widely influenced by the media space given to some individuals who do not come from a medical background at all, who have gained increasingly more ground on social networks, but also on main television stations,” said Basha.

The panelists also noted that many individuals follow an emotional rather than rational approach in choosing sources of information, and they also tend to trust sources

within their own circle of friends or relatives. Algorithms are another crucial influence in the choice of information sources, targeting and delivering news to people based on their preferences and history in social platforms. Information bubbles are thus further strengthened, restricting the entry opportunities for different sources of information.

Indicator 18: Civil society uses quality information to improve their communities.

The panelists found themselves in agreement on the role of CSOs and NGOs in Albanian society. A large number of NGOs are registered in the country, even though most of them are dormant and are activated only in specific cases. The panelists’ discussion focused only on the NGOs that are continuously active and assessed their roles as important especially in providing qualitative research, engaging in advocacy actions, and

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monitoring policy implementation. “There is an increase in the number of NGOs that come with concrete proposals and critique, and which are finding even more media space, and this is a good influence on quality media content,” said Muka.

On the other hand, panelists mentioned that certain NGOs have expressed difficulties in finding media space and promoting their work or viewpoints. One of the panelists also highlighted that several NGOs that have their own media and have been influential in informing the public in a qualitative and independent manner. These groups include BIRN Albania, Faktoje.al, Citizens Channel, and the Albanian Center for Quality Journalism. “I want to especially single out the NGO media. They have played a very qualitative role in setting high standards for journalism reporting,” said Dervishi.

CSOs’ contributions in terms of information, activities, monitoring, or advocacy initiatives are constantly shared with the public, thanks also to the high use of social networks in this respect. However, the real impact in influencing policy changes or the mindset of the population might be limited, for various reasons. “Civil society is definitely on the good side, but it is still disputable how much influence or power it has, and we have to be aware of this,” said Lani. To support this argument, the panelists shared examples of citizens being poorly reflected and minimally involved with NGO initiatives and activities.

Indicator 19: Government uses quality information to make public policy decisions.

The panelists levied heavy criticism on the government on this point. In theory, the state has different mechanisms to interact with the civil society and the media, such as press conferences, press meetings, and communication in the media space or on social networks. However, the

panelists argued that government terms and propaganda, rather than public interest, generally shape such communications. Press conferences, for example, have grown increasingly rare, and they are often reduced to spokespersons reading statements, with no opportunities for reporters to ask follow-up questions. “The political discourse is rarely based on facts, or rarely refers to news or information from media or civil society,” said Cenkollari, “The debate is mainly based on propaganda or interests of political parties.” Further backing this point is that government officials have their own media channels for communicating with the media and the public.

“**The mass campaign for vaccination against COVID-19 was widely influenced by the media space given to some individuals who do not come from a medical background at all, who have gained increasingly more ground on social networks, but also on main television stations,” said Basha.**

The panelists said that they largely consider political parties and government officials to be the biggest sources of disinformation in the country. Furthermore, the panelists agreed that the government mainly ignores serious media investigation reports, apart from a few cases. Some panelists said that at times, government authorities will discredit or ridicule serious journalists. “There have been cases when the government or politicians have attacked media that have delivered quality reporting, saying that this is fake news,” said Sulce.

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights

The panelists did not give the government high marks for its reaction or responsiveness to reporting that exposes corruption. The panelists agreed that authorities tend to react to petty corruption cases, without the same willingness to respond to big affairs. “What we have seen is that the interventions are mainly of a blitz type of operation, and focus on the individual, rather than on the phenomenon,” said Senja.

The panel agreed that the government is typically selective in reacting to reports of media on corruption, and it is guilty of applying double standards. One of the panelists mentioned that in some cases, the govern-

ment tried to minimize or ridicule such media reports, rather than react to the corruption they were exposing. “There is a tendency to deny such reports. The media has exposed corruption or abuse, but there have also been many attempts to undo such reports. And we see this not only in the relations of the government to the people, but also within the parties themselves; they deny the reality instead of opening their eyes and seeing it,” said Dervishi.

The panelists agreed that they have seen no evidence of quality information affecting election results, or reducing or preventing corruption. “Experience so far has shown that disinformation factories did lose in the elections, and people tend to see other factors, too, not just the information,” Lani said, “They are affected by the candidate, by the parties. It is a complex situation and you cannot explain everything through information choices.”

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