

MEDIA

SUSTAINABILITY

INDEX

2005



IREX

The cumulative effect of incremental steps, not dramatic moments, altered the media landscape in Eastern Europe and Eurasia during 2005. No “color” revolutions transformed media sectors as had happened in previous years in Georgia and Ukraine. Many thought Kyrgyzstan would follow this path, but after the brief spasm of protests forced the president to flee the country in March 2005, no major changes moved the media sector forward. Meanwhile, Uzbekistan took another path by violently quashing May protests in Andijan, leading to hundreds of deaths and a crackdown across all parts of civil society—media, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and political parties.

But in countries where reforms within the media sector have been the focus of sustained attention by free-press advocates, media business entrepreneurs, and international supporters, the Media Sustainability Index (MSI) shows results are accumulating. Southeastern Europe continues to lead the region with a more professional media, more sophisticated business practices, a gradually improving legal environment, and better-developed supporting institutions. The prospects are bright, with several countries starting the process of negotiating European Union (EU) membership, meaning they must adhere to EU standards, including those in the media sphere. Foreign investment in media has been expanding, bringing infusions of capital and business expertise. The legacies of the violent collapse of Yugoslavia are starting to be addressed as Bosnia addresses EU membership, Kosovo’s final status talks proceed, and Montenegro prepares for a referendum on its union with Serbia. Bulgaria, Croatia, and Romania all look increasingly toward Europe as EU membership becomes a more attainable goal.

Central Asia remains the laggard. Independent media do operate, and brave, hard-working journalists do the best they can. But the governments of the region have not embraced media freedoms and seek to keep the independent media weak and ineffective through a repressive legal framework, extra-legal harassment, and lack of investment. Economic troubles and crumbling infrastructures compound the obstacles. Uzbekistan clearly has embarked on a policy of cutting off independent voices in the country. The regimes in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan have not understood the benefits of a free media and have failed to embrace reform.

To the north, Russia continues to constrict the space for dissenting views, both in the media and civil society, although its sheer size and the momentum of earlier advances in media pluralism mean a degree of discourse carries on. In Belarus, however, the limitations on media independence have tightened steadily. Harassment through the judicial system and outside it, along with changes in media legislation, are slowly starving Belarus’s independent print media, reducing circulation, and destroying the financial base. Moldova continues relatively stagnant with the reformed communist government disinclined to pursue significant media reform. Ukraine remains, for the second year, a bright spot in the region following the Orange Revolution. While change has not been as fast or as profound as many hoped, the government has not engaged

in the repressive tactics of the previous Kuchma regime. Media companies have seized the opening provided and, if the government were willing to make media reform a priority, would be poised to make a substantial push toward a more developed independent sector.

The Caucasus continue perched at the cusp of change. Georgia showed initial progress in media independence after the Rose Revolution in 2003 but has not consolidated these advances. Azerbaijan under the second Aliyev generation shows little inclination for profound reform. Armenia has witnessed minimal development in independent media since the first MSI in 2001. The region has key elements of a successful media system with private broadcasters and private print media. But media remain closely tied to political and business agendas, and there has been no breakthrough in professionalism, the legal framework, or commercial management. There are reasons for optimism, though, because through the initiatives of local activists and donors, a core of professionals is ready to move the media sector forward, albeit more incrementally than many would like.

Several issues of concern common across countries and regions were raised by the media professionals on the 2005 MSI panels. Among them was the negative side of "commercialization." With domestic and foreign investors seeking solid returns on their capital, many criticize media for seeking the lowest common denominator as they peddle scandal, entertainment, and gossip at the expense of news and public affairs. As one editor of a Croatian paper wrote to his staff: "I want sensations. Don't tell me there are no sensations; create them, I don't care." Whether this represents a maturation of the market as niches develop for every approach from tabloid to "serious" news or rather portends a race to the bottom remains to be seen. But the concern mirrors that expressed by media critics in the mature democracies of the West, whether in Europe or America, who fear the news is becoming trivialized in the struggle to maintain market share amid hundreds of television channels and the Internet. As the MSI panelists noted, hard news coverage suffers, and in-depth reporting diminishes.

During the five years that the MSI assessment has been conducted for the region, media law has been a great concern in most countries. A legal and regulatory framework supportive of free speech is essential for the long-term sustainability of independent media. It protects the media from hostile regimes, helps build a political culture supportive of free speech, and creates commercial opportunity. The difficulty of implementing

such a framework is apparent from the MSI and more than a decade of media development effort in the region. It can be expected to take two to five years to pass a new media law, but only then does the hard part—implementation—begin. For instance, in Bosnia it took more than two years to develop and pass into law a freedom-of-information act, and this was in a country where there was international oversight of the legislative process. Implementation has been halting. Vildana Selimbegović, editor of *Dani* magazine, finds that certain public information, mainly public spending, simply cannot be accessed. "I have tried everything, but there are expenditures from certain coffers that are unavailable to journalists," she said. "I have tried using the Law on Access to Information, and I have 24 rejections. Six months overdue. End of story."

Media sectors will not be reformed overnight. This is the lesson from the Rose and Orange Revolutions and the overthrow of President Milosevic in Serbia. Expectations were high that the new reformist governments would move rapidly on media law revisions after the previous government had used or misused laws to keep independent media down. Serbia, five years from the overthrow of Milosevic, still has not gone through a broadcast licensing process, and hundreds of outlets continue to operate in limbo. In Georgia, it took nearly two years after the revolution to pass a broadcast law that could mark a major change in the sector and development of true public-service broadcasting. However, as the panelists pointed out, "Although Georgia enjoys quite liberal legislation that regulates media as compared to the other post-Soviet countries, implementation of these laws remains a problem. Corrupt and incompetent judges as well as prosecutors and investigators, who operate under enormous administrative pressure, often leave the media without the legal means for its defense." These examples demonstrate that media sectors are not reshaped in a vacuum; immature and at times unreformed judicial systems are among the most significant obstacles to sustainable media reform.

The long course of media-law reform points to the inescapable fact that taking a media system borne of a repressive regime to a point where it can be judged free and sustainable takes substantial commitments of time, attention, and innovation. While Southeast Europe in 2005 once again represents the best-performing region, no media system in any country assessed by the MSI can be said to have reached clear sustainability. Even Croatia, which just reached sustainability, did so by the barest of margins. It has seen only two changes of government since the 1999 death of President Franjo Tudjman, nationalism

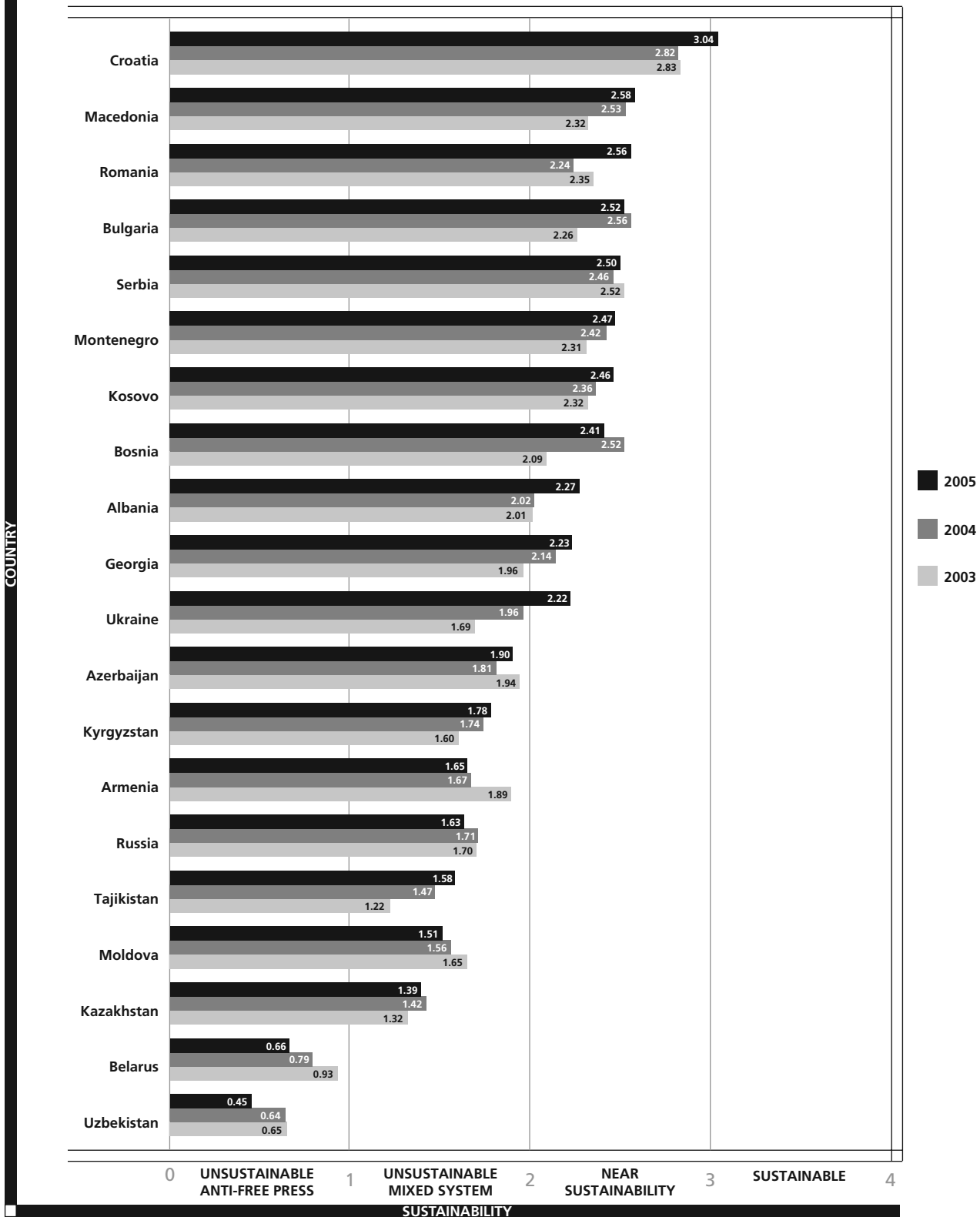
remains a concern, and, although the media market has matured, fair application of laws has not been tested across regimes or in good and bad economic times.

This need for commitment points to a key element of successful media reform—strong, local institutions dedicated to advocacy and professionalization. “Color” revolutions cannot be relied on to change the media landscape. While they certainly can bring positive change, their main effect seems to be a temporary unleashing of the media and media advocates. But deeper professionalization, legal and regulatory reform, and development of media businesses takes dedicated specialists. Where governments are repressive, there may be individuals struggling to fill these roles, but the institutions tend to be weak and underdeveloped. Central Asia possesses no strong free-speech NGOs, trade groups, or professional associations, despite having courageous activists. Southeastern Europe has witnessed development of strong organizations to promote media reform, including the Croatian Journalists’ Association, the Association of Independent Electronic Media in Serbia, the Association of Bulgarian Broadcasters, and

the Association of Professional Electronic Media of Macedonia. These and many other organizations have been increasingly effective in promoting the agenda of independent media before their governments. Ukraine and Georgia have witnessed strengthened professional and trade associations since their revolutions, including the Ukrainian Newspaper Publishers’ Association, the Independent Association of Broadcasters in Ukraine, and the Georgian National Association of Broadcasters.

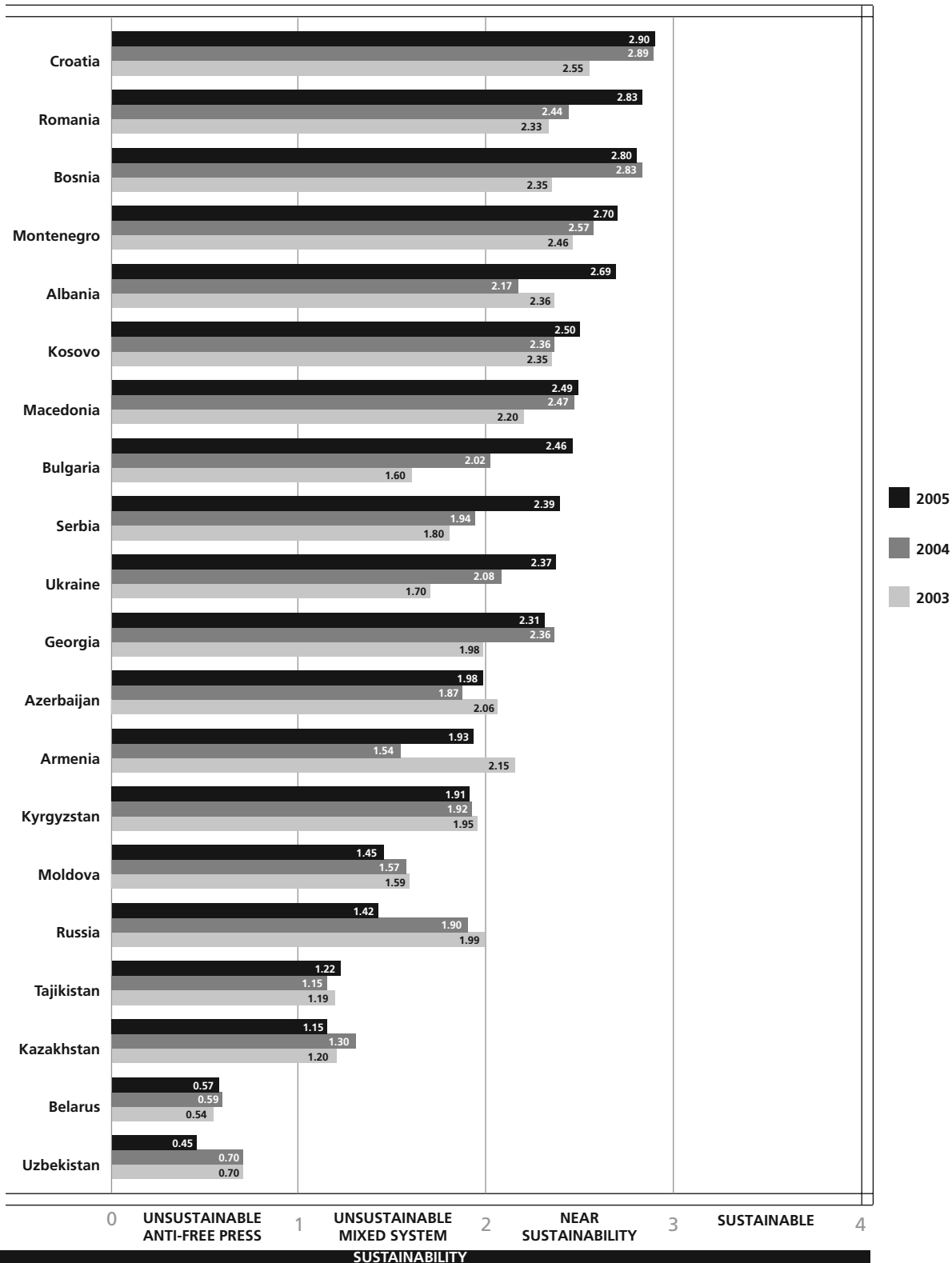
With five years of data now collected, the MSI demonstrates that change is only the first part of the equation, with sustained effort needed to ensure that implementation and results follow. The route from the first brave protests of journalists challenging the official dictate to the myriad of views provided by a successful independent media industry is a long one. However, the MSI also charts the results that ongoing advocacy and investment can achieve in strengthening independent media businesses and public broadcasting, and in institutionalizing a robust media system that promotes government transparency and accountability and brings citizens the information they need and deserve.

AVERAGE SCORING FOR ALL OBJECTIVES

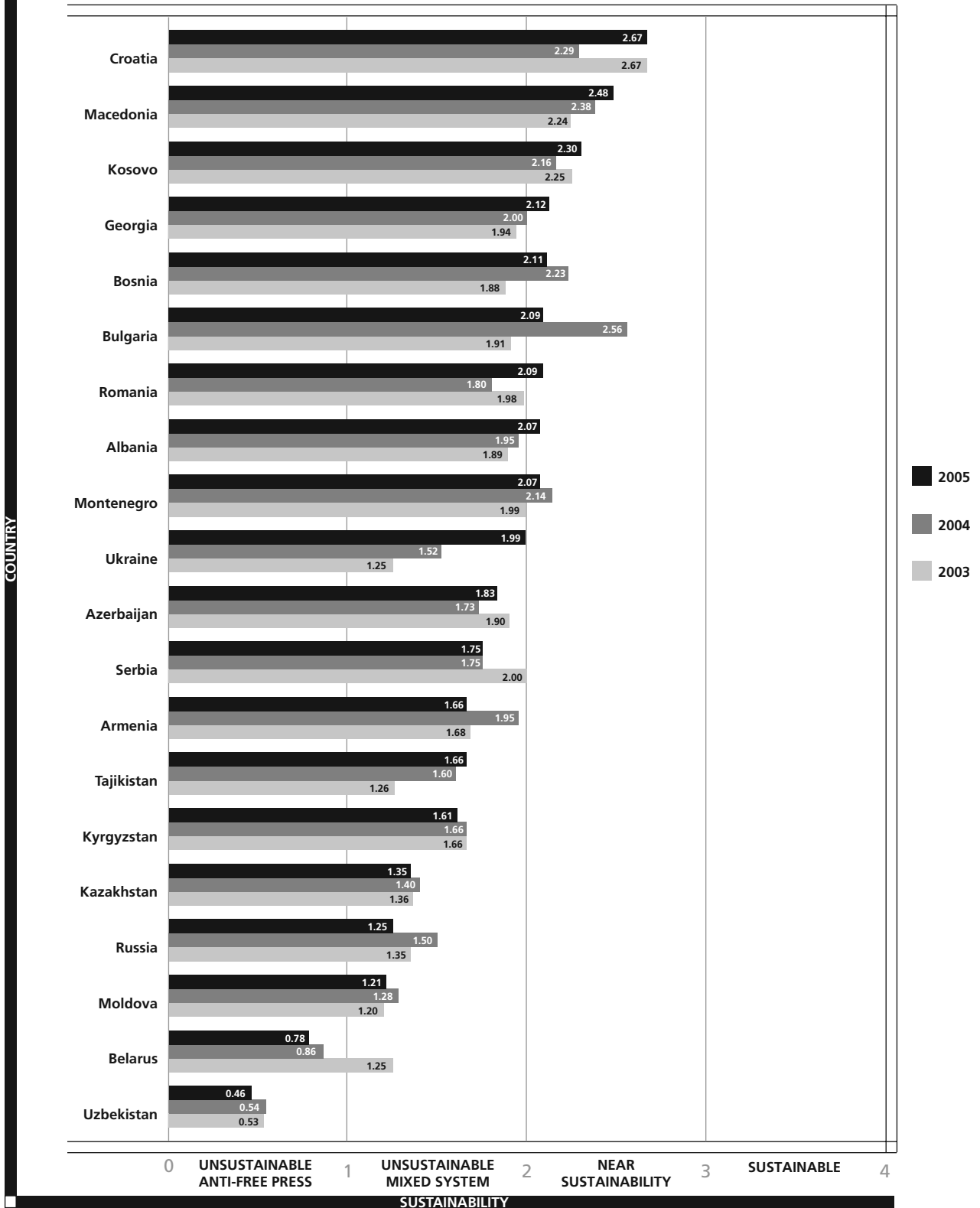


OBJECTIVE 1: FREE SPEECH

COUNTRY

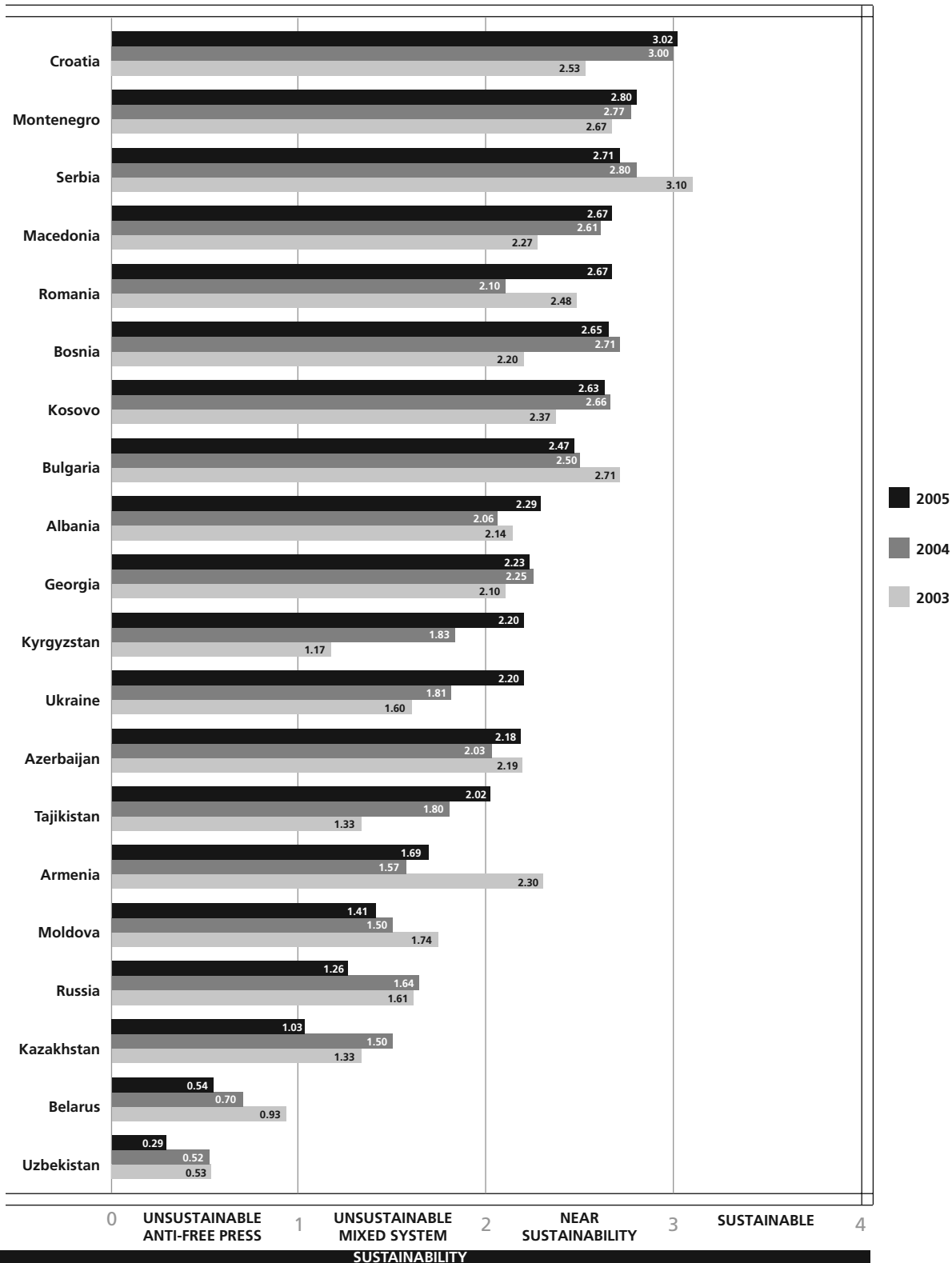


OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

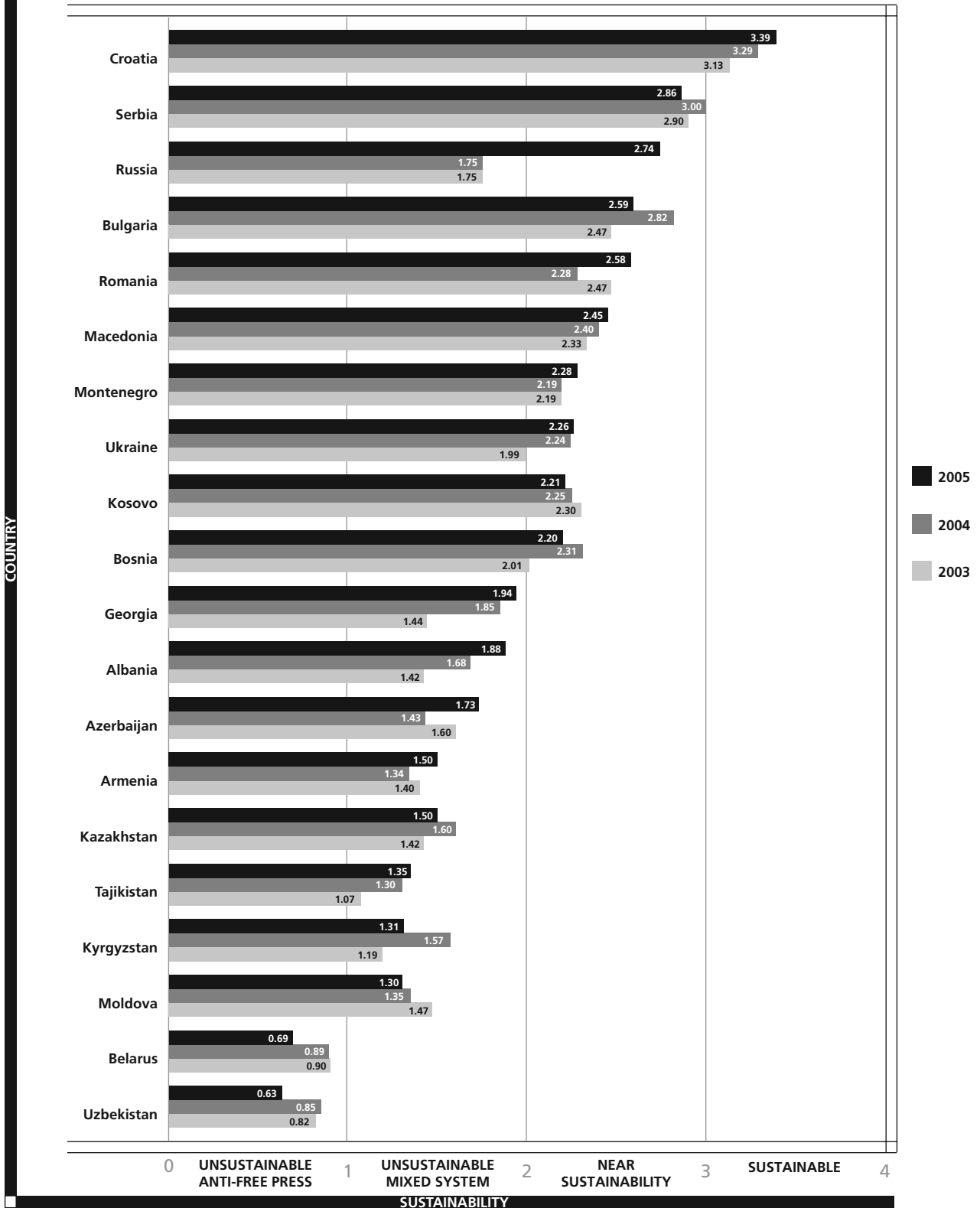


OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES

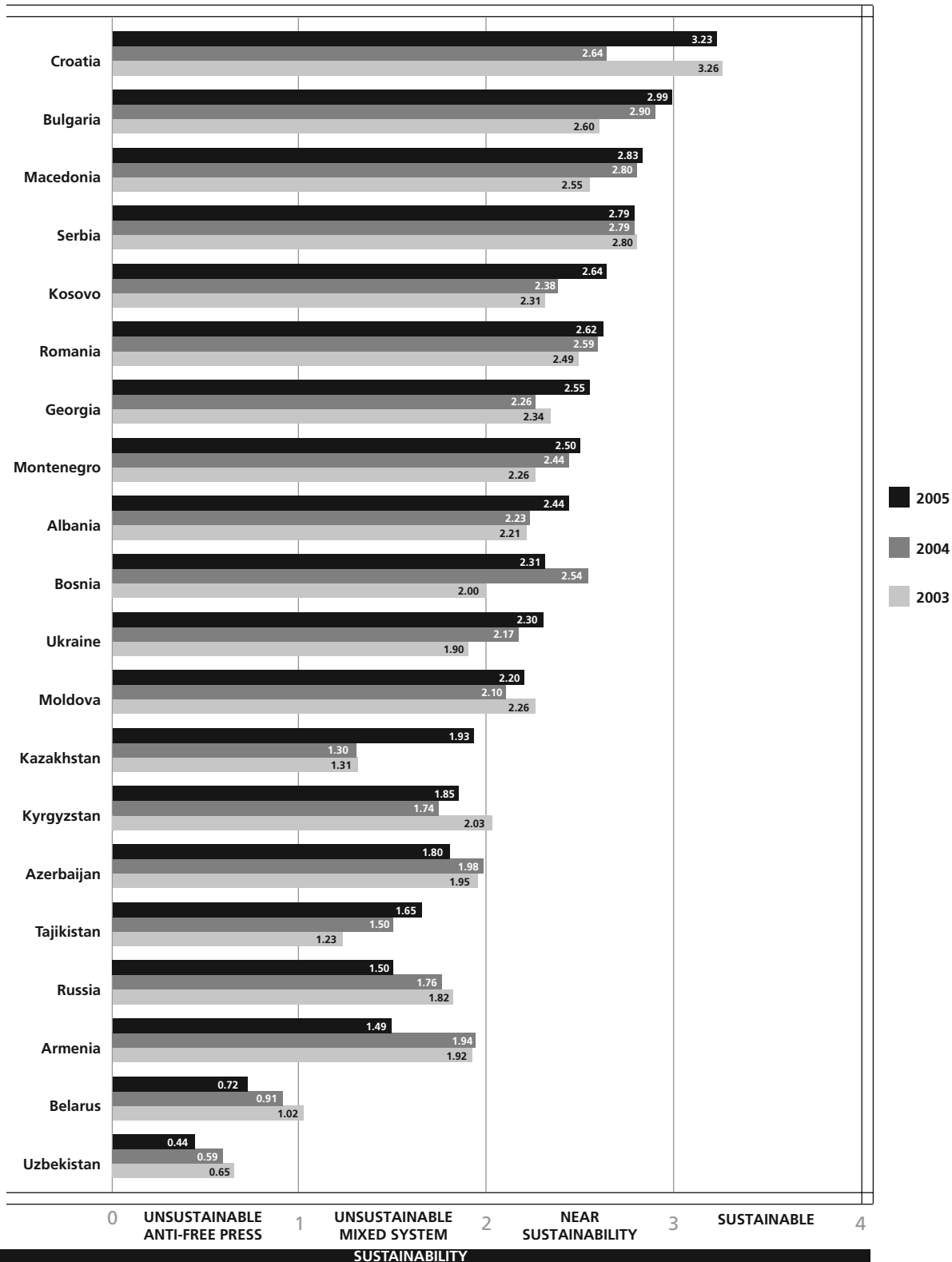
COUNTRY



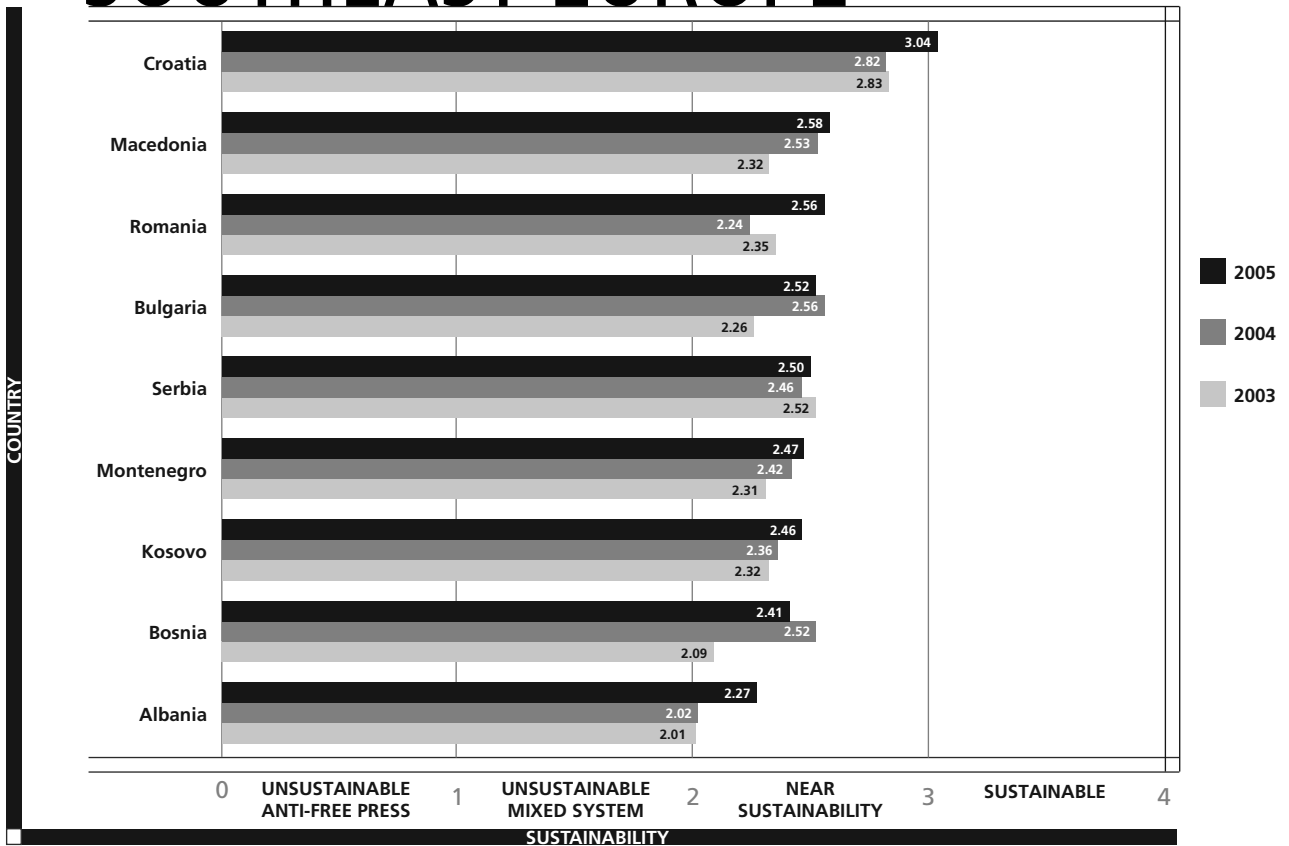
OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT



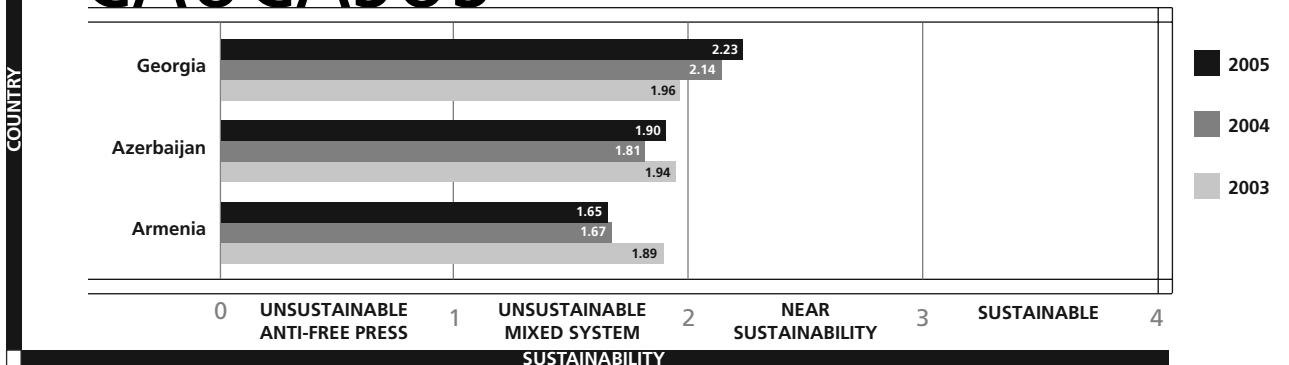
OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS



AVERAGE OBJECTIVE SCORES SOUTHEAST EUROPE

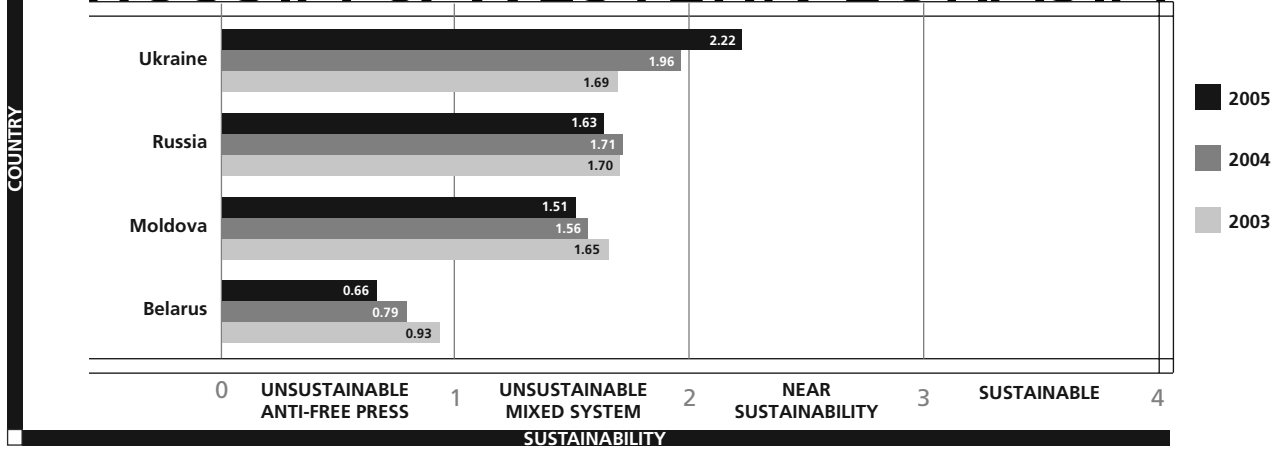


AVERAGE OBJECTIVE SCORES CAUCASUS



AVERAGE OBJECTIVE SCORES

RUSSIA & WESTERN EURASIA



AVERAGE OBJECTIVE SCORES

CENTRAL ASIA

