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ALBANIA

The 2009 MSI score for Albania dropped significantly compared with the previous year, with downward trends in all five objectives.

Political developments did not favor media freedom. Even important achievements in European integration, such as Albania's advancement to NATO membership in 2008, did not lead to a significant positive impact on political processes, in the view of the MSI panel. The first half of the year was dominated by the intense and controversial election campaign that took place in June. During this period, an ever-increasing tendency of political parties to manipulate the public and private media for electoral propaganda purposes was again visible to MSI panelists. Even among the media community, the alignment in favor of one party or another prevailed in contrast to commitment to preserving professional integrity and objectivity.

After the June parliamentary elections, the tendency of political players to attempt to manipulate the media to advance their interests did not fade. When a demand for a recount was denied, the opposition refused to enter parliament, organizing one of the largest protests in the 20-year post-communist period. Due to the large number of opposition-held seats, the boycott has been prolonged and prevented the parliament from attaining the three-fifths quorum necessary to carry out essential reforms for the EU integration process.

As could be expected, the political crisis transferred to the media, with the government attempting to consolidate its majority at the National Council of Radio and Television (NCRT). The tensest moment came when a powerful businessman, clearly allied with Prime Minister Sali Berisha, and his bodyguards physically assaulted the publisher of *Tema*, Mero Baze. The event provoked strong protests against the government by journalists, the Union of Albanian Journalists, the opposition, and members of the international community. Baze and the newspaper he directs, seen as investigating corruption allegations, also had been subject to political pressure the year before, when the printing house was blocked by the government.

The MSI panel considered these incidents as reflecting an alliance between the government and powerful business interests against media freedom. This concern was reflected in the lower rankings for all the objectives of the MSI compared with the previous year. The most significant decline was in Objective 1: Freedom of Speech. The supporting institutions for the media were seen as strongest among the objectives, with media business management the weakest area.

ALBANIA AT A GLANCE

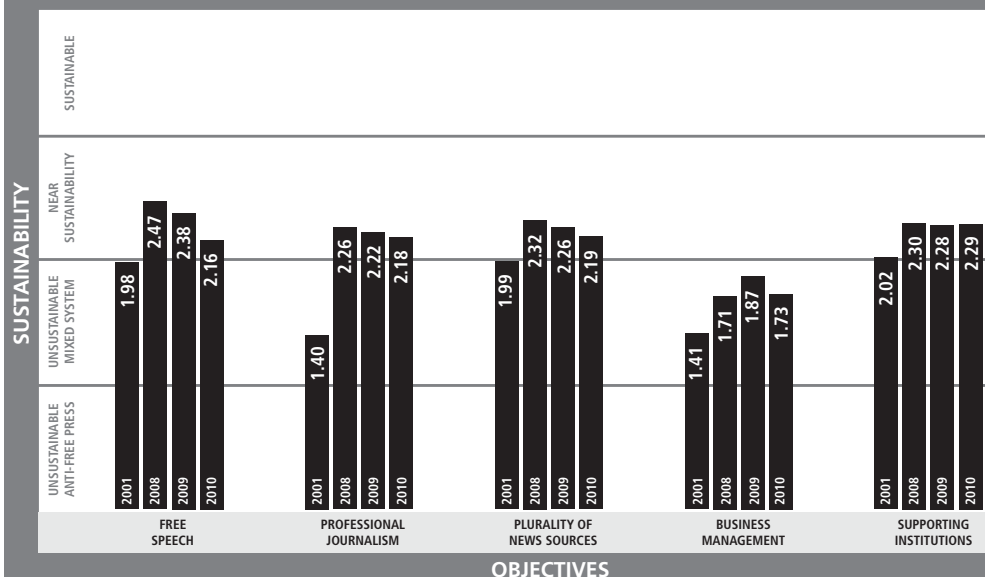
GENERAL

- > **Population:** 3,639,453 (July 2009, *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Capital city:** Tirana
- > **Ethnic groups (% of population):** Albanian 95%, Greek 3%, other 2% (Vlach, Roma, Serb, Macedonian, Bulgarian) (1989 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Religion:** Muslim 70%, Albanian Orthodox 20%, Roman Catholic 10% (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Languages:** Albanian (official - derived from Tosk dialect), Greek, Vlach, Romani, Slavic dialects (2001 census, *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **GNI (2008-Atlas):** \$12.06 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2009)
- > **GNI per capita (2008-PPP):** \$7,950 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2009)
- > **Literacy rate:** 98.7% (male: 99.2%, female: 98.3%) (2001 census)
- > **President or top authority:** President Bamir Topi (since July 24, 2007)

MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- > **Number of print outlets, radio stations, television stations:** Print outlets: 190 (Albanian Media Institute); Radio stations: 52 (48 local, 4 national) (NCRT); Television stations: 72 (69 local, 3 national) (NCRT)
- > **Newspaper circulation statistics (total circulation and largest paper):** about 30 million (Albanian Media Institute)
- > **Broadcast ratings:** N/A
- > **Annual advertising revenue in the media sector:** \$82 million (Thanas Goga)
- > **News agencies:** Albanian News Agency (state), and ALNA (private)
- > **Internet usage:** 471,000 (2008 est., *CIA World Factbook*)

MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: ALBANIA



Annual scores for 2002 through 2006/2007 are available online at http://www.irex.org/programs/MSI_EUR/archive.asp

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

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

Unsustainable Mixed System (1-2):

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

Near Sustainability (2-3):

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

Sustainable (3-4):

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

OBJECTIVE 1: FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Albania Objective Score: 2.16

This objective presented the most significant drop compared with the previous year, from 2.38 to 2.16. Panelists said this resulted from the lack of implementation of legal norms, combined with political interference to restrain critical media. In fact, Albania has the necessary legal structure—freedom of speech is protected by the constitution, and there are laws on electronic media, access to information, and other aspects of media. These acts are generally in line with international standards, excluding the fact that defamation, libel, and insult remain subject to the penal code—despite five-year-old proposals to decriminalize defamation that remain pending in parliament.

Public reaction to freedom-of-speech issues remains controversial. Some understand the fundamental importance of freedom of speech in a democracy, while others, prompted by perceived abuses and excesses in the name of free speech, accuse journalists of inflaming political tensions. Although there are case of journalists exercising extreme political bias, violating the privacy of their perceived political opponents, and exercising hate speech, several public-opinion polls have ranked the media among the least corrupt Albanian institutions.

Violence against journalists is not widespread, but neither is defense of media freedom, except by organizations of journalists and human-rights defenders. “Public reactions to violations of media freedom are still weak,” said media analyst Valbona Kurti. According to Gent Ibrahim, a media lawyer, “The state does not act fairly by not applying penal processes in crimes against journalists, and the reactions against these episodes emerge mainly from the journalism community rather than from other social groups.”

According to Preçe Zogaj, for many years a member of the Parliamentary Media Commission, failure to implement the law is the key issue. Zogaj illustrated a clear violation of the law on the right to access of information through the scandal surrounding the greatest investment in Albania, that of the road Durrës-Kukës-Morinë. According to Zogaj, when the government held meetings to discuss the financing of the construction, not only the media but also the public has the right to be informed. However, he said, no one has been able to secure the minutes of the meetings, not even the prosecutor’s office, although there have been alleged violations of procurement legislation.

The panel did note that there is no requirement to register in order to use the Internet or install satellite connections.

Internet service is unregulated, and service providers are not accountable for content.

Almost all participants in the panel shared the opinion that the licensing process for broadcasting media has become less competitive and increasingly politicized. The greatest objections were related to the activity of the regulatory NCRT. The panelists focused on the recent appointment of the ex-advisor of the prime minister and ex-advisor to the parliament speaker as NCRT members. “These appointments reveal a rather disturbing politicization of the NCRT,” said Zogaj. This followed the departure of ex-chairwoman of the NCRT, Mesila Doda, who won a parliamentary seat in 2009 as a member of the ruling Democratic Party.

The panelists brought numerous examples to illustrate the politicized decision-making of the NCRT in favor of media close to those in power. “The NCRT has been working for many years now, and I expected more professionalism from its administration, in terms of researching the media market and in the plans for allocation of frequencies,” said Thanas Goga, a marketing analyst. Panelists criticized the NCRT’s decision to allow a private television station to retain its national license for a long time after it had gone bankrupt and had ceased broadcasting, at a time when active stations were still seeking licenses. The NCRT fine to News 24 television, the warning to Vizion+ about anticorruption advertising spots that the government disliked, and the attempt to remove some Vizion+ antennas were also considered politicized decisions. To Kurti, the NCRT has never been independent from political power, as evidenced by the people close to the government on the panel or who have been MPs before or after their tenure. No panelists objected to the claim that stations critical of the government are discriminated against by selective and unequal implementation of laws by the NCRT. Meanwhile, it was also noted that there was limited possibility to appeal decisions due to the political pressure on the judiciary. According to Kurti, this is a phenomenon that is “widely accepted in Albania.”

The panel observed that the legal terms for entering the media market are no different from those applied for other businesses. Media are no more overtaxed than other businesses; in fact, they are exempt from some taxes, such as VAT (value-added tax) on imported paper. However, to Yzeiri, entering the media market is a freedom investors use to promote their interests more than support free expression. He noted that although there are a large number of daily newspapers, the total circulation is not thought to exceed 70,000 copies, and he suggested that this results from a lack of government engagement with the industry. Other panelists said government support for the media could be a

dangerous precedent for media dependency that could result in loss of editorial independence.

The panelists said crimes against journalists and media are rare. In the past year, the media community, through the Union of Albanian Journalists, protested in front of the government headquarters over the violence against Mero Baze after a series of investigations he published on government corruption. This is the latest in a pattern of harassment against Baze. During a roundtable organized by the union, foreign diplomats called on the judiciary to act, and the prosecution initiated an investigation on the case.

The panelists said that other, more subtle forms of pressure and harassment are increasing, including efforts to control editorial policies through the media owners, or by exerting indirect pressure on critical journalists. Yzeiri denounced the censorship that the investigative anti-corruption program Hapur has suffered for years now. The government has pressured public and private television stations to refuse to broadcast this program, which is supported by UNDEF. Aleksandër Çipa, chairman of the Union of Albanian Journalists, also noted, "The firing of family members of journalists critical of the government, as in the case of journalists Mustafa Nano and Andrea Stefani, is a form of pressure and political revenge of the government against free speech."

On the day that the MSI panel took place, some opposition parties protested in front of the public radio and television station RTSH, calling on the public to stop paying the tax

for a station that is public by name, but instead serves the government as a propaganda tool to manipulate public opinion. The panelists consider RTSH essentially a government outlet. Freelance journalist Lutfi Dervishi commented, "Regarding public television, Albania can compete with and surpass even Belarus for lack of media freedom." The panelists remarked that even though the emergence of many private stations has weakened the political struggle for prevailing over RTSH, the damage to media freedom is a significant one, because the broadcasting spaces are misused and are not used for the public good. Noted Dervishi with sarcasm, "Media in Albania are in great debt to RTSH, since it has become a model of how a television is not supposed to be."

State media do enjoy special benefits, and independent outlets are punished, in the view of the panel. Kurti reinforced this opinion: "The government, even though it acts as though it is not concerned with the media, in fact acts astutely, blocking information coming from media that criticizes it as much as it can, favoring instead the media that support the government with state advertisements or other benefits."

Prime Minister Sali Berisha's government, reconfirmed to power in June 2009, imposed upon itself a moratorium on suits against journalists for libel and defamation. In such cases, the burden of proof is always on the plaintiff. However, the panelists said there have been misinterpretations by courts that have transferred the burden to accused journalists. Accuracy constitutes an absolute protection against defamation charges, but panelists said the low degree of judicial independence from political influence could result in journalists being punished by penal law and civil law, having to pay remuneration for infringing upon privacy and causing moral and financial damage. The panel noted that although a year ago, the court ruled the government's blocking of the printing house of the daily newspaper *Tema* was illegal, it remains blocked. The arrest and imprisonment of millionaire businessman Rezar Taçi in the assault of publisher Mero Baze also was seen as reflecting the political will of the government, which panelists said feared being discredited publicly.

For five years now, a bill decriminalizing defamation has been pending approval by lawmakers, even though in principle it has been hailed by the whole political sphere. The bill transforms defamation from a criminal to a civil case, allowing proportional fines that would not lead to a chilling effect on the media. "Regarding the decriminalization of defamation and libel, Albanian legislation is more backward than its neighbors, stemming from a lack of political will," said panelist Remzi Lani, director of the Albanian Media Institute. According to Musa Ulqini, a former member of the Parliamentary Commission on Mass Media, the members of parliament

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

FREE-SPEECH INDICATORS:

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

hesitate to decriminalize defamation, since such a thing cannot be done only for journalists, but for the whole society.

In addition, explained Ulqini, politicians feel more protected from journalists if the criminal punishment for defamation and libel is in place, even though no journalist has been sent to court using this law to date. The panel does not view the moratorium imposed by the government, according to which no high official can charge a journalist for defamation, as a final and long-term solution to this problem. It is an even more insufficient solution in the spirit of law or ethics. Meanwhile, advocates of the criminal-law version point to the fact that some Western countries, such as France or Norway, still allow criminal punishments on defamation and libel. However, the panelists noted that Albania's judiciary power is not free of political influences, and since the potential to make use of such legislation to attack the journalists remains high, panelists advocate decriminalization.

The panel gave generally negative assessments regarding journalists' access to public information. "Even though the public offices have satisfactory circumstances, they are not that generous with a journalist if he or she comes from an opposition media outlet," said Zogaj. Ilir Yzeiri, a journalism professor at one of the private universities who contributes to the investigative anti-corruption program Hapur, complained that obtaining information from ministries and local government bodies has become increasingly difficult. In addition to the example mentioned above, involving secrecy surrounding government meetings on the Durrës-Kukës-Morinë road-construction project, the panel noted other instances documenting the increasing difficulty of collecting public information. Kurti recalled an instance when journalists of Vizion+ were told to leave the government press conference hall because the prime minister disliked their program.

Goga remarked that the websites of state institutions are not very transparent. "There have been significant cases when rather controversial laws and decisions have been removed from the websites of the government and different ministries, making it more difficult to reveal the truth that the public seeks," said Goga. For example, the government decisions regarding the tender of Durrës-Kukës road, which allegedly had been made violating the law, were removed from the website of the government, as if to hide from the media and the public a scorching government secret. More often than not, even important bills, such as the anti-mafia one, have not been exposed on the websites, even though they have been the topics of a vivid political debate.

The legislation related to public information is also relatively advanced. The constitution guarantees journalists access to public information. There is also a law on access to public

information, guaranteed by the people's advocate. However, in truth, according to the panel, journalists generally do not take full advantage of these laws. Similarly, they apparently lack confidence in the authorities and do not seek the support of the people's advocate when they are denied the right to access this information. As a result, journalists are often forced to use other sources, and this may lead to inaccuracies and open up the possibility of legal difficulties.

On the other hand, media outlets have almost unlimited access to international news and information sources, though the news and photo services of prestigious international news agencies are prohibitively expensive. This absence sometimes leads the newspaper staff to pirate services, such as photos. However, according to panelist Andi Tela, editor-in-chief of the daily *Panorama*, even though buying the services of Reuters might be out of reach, the Internet helps to fill the gaps. Media managers are able to secure reasonably priced Internet subscriptions for their employees.

Access to the journalism profession is free, and the government does not impose licenses and limitations. However, some panelists would welcome regulation of access to the profession by the media community itself. According to them, such a free situation, without any criteria for entering the profession of journalist, has negatively affected the quality of reporting.

OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

Albania Objective Score: 2.18

Scores for this MSI objective, which assesses professional standards and journalism quality, declined just slightly from the 2009 score, 2.22.

The panel remarked that journalism standards fluctuate among several tendencies. On a positive note, the professional growth of journalists is encouraged both through the opening of journalism branches in some of the universities in the country and through the training sessions organized by the Albanian Media Institute or UNDEF. While the theoretical knowledge of reporters and journalists has been enriched through these training sessions, other trends, such as the poverty of most media and their political alignment, tend to downplay this development.

According to Lani, "In the Albanian journalism community you can find impostors, but also honorable journalists." According to Zogaj, most of the journalists and reporters lack the time to consult a wide number of sources, due to much reduced staffs in most of the media, which, because of financial problems, has become even more visible in this period of economic

crisis. "The fact that they have to prepare several reports and news in one day leads journalists to frequently cite just one source, instead of several sources, as professional standards dictate," said Zogaj. "You cannot speak of fair, objective, and well-informed reporting when the largest newspaper in the country only has 15 reporters and when journalists and editors never have the time to understand what has happened, but only to convey what the politicians say in press conferences," said Dervishi. According to Dervishi, cases of truly qualitative reporting remain limited. Kurti stressed that although Albanian journalists face many challenges verifying their news, editors could compensate by taking more care in their jobs. Panelists did note that a higher quality of economic news reporting is emerging, which is a result not only of the growing knowledge of reporters, but also of their more frequent consulting with experts in the area.

In Albania, ethical standards for journalists are defined in the Code of Ethics, approved by the associations of journalists some years ago. They are harmonized with international standards. There is also a Council of Ethics tasked with reacting to violations of the code. However, it is difficult to spot even one case when the Code of Ethics and its standards have been applied, despite instances of journalists using hate speech and defamation in the past year, according to the panel. There were even journalists who assaulted other journalists with differing opinions. As a reaction against violations of professional ethics, and to build solidarity within the media community on ethics, the Union of Albanian Journalists organized a roundtable of editors-in-chief and well-known journalists, who discussed implementation of the Code of Ethics. "We are in a situation when repeatedly, even though not on a daily basis, ethical standards in the media are broken and there is no punishing reaction from the

Council of Ethics; rather, the prevailing mentality is to ignore ethics," said Çipa. The panel gave the opinion that in spite of the progress made with ethical issues in journalism in 20 years of transition, we are not dealing yet with a sustainable value of the journalism community. There are speculations, not backed up with evidence, that some journalists have accepted bribes in exchange for certain articles, and some journalists allegedly blackmailed subjects under their investigation.

Even though Albania has never had a censorship institution, even under communist dictatorship, self-censorship is present and problematic in the work of journalists. It is a self-censorship that is widening the array of forbidden topics and problems to report on, also thanks to the merger of politics and government with corrupt businesses. If some years ago a journalist could not criticize the party in power on political grounds, today economic corruption is off-limits, and pressure also comes from different business groups. Tela noted that he gave the indicator on self-censorship the lowest score of all MSI indicators in his questionnaire, saying, "I think that self-censorship is a plague for Albanian journalism, and it is the most serious problem, which will haunt it for years."

The spread of self-censorship is also a consequence of the fact that journalists are not independent of their owners, who often dictate to journalists which topics are forbidden. There is not enough work to go around for journalists, and job insecurity, combined with low salaries and the absence of a system that would protect their rights, leads journalists to self-censor. In this sense, as Zogaj said, "self-censorship in Albania appears to be a triumph of censorship."

Self-censorship is also dictated by the media market's overall poverty, with few advertisement clients, some of which provide such a critical revenue stream that they are able to influence editorial policies. The panel mentioned the case of the high tariffs that Albania's three mobile telephone companies impose. Several years ago, the media covered this situation extensively. Today, the situation is completely different; it is very difficult to find a station or newspaper that reports on the mobile telephone companies and the tariffs. These companies are among the biggest providers of advertisement to a poor media, and they have managed to transform their high tariffs into a taboo topic for the media.

Exemplifying the total dependence of some media on political parties, the panel described how, during the parliamentary election campaign, the media aired stories prepared by the staffs of political parties. "The way that television and newspapers covered the electoral campaign, by broadcasting the tapes or footage received by the parties, rather than relying on inputs from their own journalists in the field, was alarming," said Tela.

JOURNALISM MEETS PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS OF QUALITY.

PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM INDICATORS:

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

Meanwhile, many journalists resort to self-censorship, even in addressing the critics of the party in power, because politicians—in cooperation with media owners—enact silent forms of revenge on their critics, such as leaving them out of studio debates, or even firing their relatives from public posts. For those journalists who respect freedom of speech and insist devoutly on the truth, the cost is high. However, while journalists critical against the power of its corruption are obstructed and attacked in different forms, the ones who choose to serve powerful interests benefit from privileged treatment.

The panel stressed that in spite of self-censorship, the Albanian media market is complex, and the sheer variety of options provides some cause for optimism. News that is censored by one television station or newspaper may be covered by another. “While self-imposed limits are visible in broadcasting or publishing certain news or problems, in Albania there are still so many television stations, radio stations, and newspapers that there are a diversity of opinions and news,” said Ulqini. However, this also has its negative side, because, as Lani said, “in Albania you have to read at least three daily newspapers in order to be informed objectively.”

While self-censorship is related only to domestic affairs in the country, today, completely unlike its past experience under communist isolation, Albania does not experience any obstacles in covering international affairs. According to the panel, the media cover other issues, including minority affairs, satisfactorily.

The panel agreed that pay levels for journalists are not high enough to suppress corruption and abuse across the profession. Unlike the first years of transition, when journalism was distinguished as a well-paid profession, this distinction has almost disappeared. Today, an Albanian reporter is paid on average €400–500 per month, more or less the wage of 12 years ago. With the exception of editors-in-chief or show hosts, who can be paid €1,500–3,000 per month, the salaries of other journalists are similar to teachers, doctors, or other public-service employees. The salaries of journalists in the districts often are 50 percent lower. Furthermore, many journalists are not insured by the media owners or companies and are forced to spend on their own for private pension and health insurance programs.

Journalism in Albania is not yet a profession you can rely on to provide a satisfactory income for a comfortable life. This appears to be why quite a few decent journalists leave the profession to enter politics or other more lucrative professions. “The relatively low salaries of most journalists help form the roots of corruption in the media and the phenomenon where some journalists take money to publish commissioned articles,” said Tela. Dervishi agreed, stating

that “rather than the phenomenon of a journalist sold for an article, the phenomenon of the sale of an entire media outlet is more frequent.”

In Albania, entertainment programs do not eclipse news and information programs; it is quite the opposite. It is the political-context programs, such as the studio debates among politicians and journalists, that have eclipsed, to a certain degree, the entertainment programs. “While I was surfing channels one evening, I noticed that there were nine debates and not even one movie or other entertainment program,” said Lani.

The panel stated that great progress has been made in the media business with regard to technical developments. “Some stations in the capital broadcast digitally, while 12 years ago all private broadcasters broadcasted in VHS,” stressed Kurti. One station has advanced to HD broadcasting. However, as in previous study years, the panelists did not fail to remark on the significant technical and technological backwardness that can be seen in some local stations in some of the poorest areas and districts in the country. This disproportion becomes more visible with the quick technical progress of the private stations in the capital and in some other bigger cities.

The media are developing niche reporting of political, economic, business, culture, and sports, even at the level of local stations. Due to the country's development stage, political problems dominate other areas, such as the economy, business, or culture. It is almost the norm that the main newspaper headlines generally focus on debate, conflict, or political crisis, and not on economic or social problems. Meanwhile, investigative reporting has also started to develop. However, anti-corruption or anti-trafficking investigative journalism programs remain very few. Such programs include the anti-corruption investigative program Hapur, supported by UNDEF, which is broadcast once per week from 20 local televisions and on the national station Vizion +, as well as the Fiks Fare program, which is broadcast daily by Top Channel. However, the panel noted that investigative journalism remains insufficient and unable to meet the need for the struggle against the country's ever-increasing corruption. The participants mentioned the challenges investigative journalists face, such as self-censorship, and the influence of the power of money, especially on media owners. “The need for more powerful investigative journalism cannot be met by blogs and websites, even though in the last years there have been some improvements in public use of this space,” said Çipa. However, the attempts of the media to investigate and report on corruption continue to go unrewarded, also due to the passivity of the prosecution and other bodies that implement the law. The media have reported on many

instances of corruption (and it is not insignificant that even in public-opinion polls, the media rank as the most active institution in the struggle against corruption), but few of those cases have ended up in court. The passivity of the institutions tasked with enforcing corruption laws frustrates the media's efforts to report corruption.

OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

Albania Objective Score: 2.19

Although this objective declined slightly this year from last year's score of 2.31, the panelists did not feel the situation differed significantly from a year ago. In fact, the assessment of the panelists fluctuated from positive to negative trends in this area. Panelists agreed that there are many news sources in Albania, which enables citizens to compare different perspectives. Recently, Albanians have been turning to the Internet more often for news, and according to Yzeiri, whose opinion was shared by other participants, "there is more visible development, as compared to four years ago, although we must admit that there are areas that are not yet covered by this [Internet] service." Tela was also positive regarding the satisfactory diversity of news sources, noting, "It is true that there are many news sources and the people are in a position where they can find arguments or news they lack in other newspapers or television stations."

Tela also expressed his concerns over the unequal media coverage of rural areas. Supported by other panelists, Tela said that 60 percent of inhabited territory, mainly the rural areas, remains out of reach for print media. "The citizens that live in the suburbs of cities and large counties do not have the option of buying newspapers and magazines. In the same way, in these areas it is impossible to have any other television signal apart from the public television RTSH, which is traditionally controlled editorially by the government." The inability to distribute newspapers and magazines across the whole country has contributed to an artificial narrowing of the print media market, which is another cause of financial hardship for the press.

Meanwhile, to Ulqini, the fact that part of the country is not covered by the print media and the signal of commercial media is not that alarming, considering the significant demographic movement that has taken place in recent years. "It is true that almost 40 percent of the country's territory is not covered by different media services; however, almost 80 percent of the population currently lives in areas where media coverage is complete and assorted," said Ulqini.

The newspapers and television stations with national reach remain based in the capital. The local newspapers are now

only a memory, as they disappeared in the first years of the transition due to depressed demand and the lack of advertisement. There are still many local television stations, one or two for each main city in the country, but their financial situation appears to be much more difficult than that of the national stations in the capital. The national stations, thanks to stronger financial support and investments, including modern technology such as a digital platform or HD, also receive the lion's share of the advertising pie. In this sense, quite a few local television stations are in danger of bankruptcy and have survived on subsidies from their owners, along with cutting operational costs and, especially, salaries. In the districts, some journalists are not paid more than €200 per month.

Some media are better about presenting a variety of different editorial viewpoints than others. In general, party media—mainly newspapers but also television stations close to one political wing or another—do not make any space for different viewpoints. Even regarding independent media, the newspapers are more prone to tolerate different viewpoints of a problem in the opinion section. When it comes to television, in general the stations appear to have less flexible positions during their news programs, but they tolerate, to different degrees, alternative viewpoints during television debates with politicians and journalists.

Although still a relatively new phenomenon, the Internet is transforming into an increasingly important source of information, especially in the main cities and among the intellectual elites and students. Some newspapers are more accessible on the Internet than in the traditional market. The Internet website of a daily newspaper that sells about 5,000 copies has about 16,000 visitors per day, most of whom are emigrants abroad. Use of YouTube or Facebook has also become more frequent.

In the panel's view, the government does not attempt to limit access to domestic or foreign media. Meanwhile, mainly the satellite connections, but also the Internet service and the mobile telephone service, have increased the options for citizens to explore international news media. However, the panel also noted that there are economic obstacles to access; there are still large numbers of Albanians who cannot afford to subscribe to an Internet service or buy a foreign newspaper that is more costly than domestic newspapers. However, in assessing this problem, the panelists focused on the lack of government restrictions more than the economic obstacles. "I do not think that there are any obstacles in accessing Internet in Albania as there are in China, for example; there are also no obstacles to foreign radio or television," said Ulqini. However, some panelists said there had been attempts, although not systematic, by the

government, to block access. Goga mentioned the case of blocking, for several days, the website of *Tema* or that of Top Channel television some years ago, when these media were in open conflict with the government.

The panelists did not spend too much time discussing the nature of public media and more specifically the Albanian Public Radio and Television, because to all participants it was clear that after 20 years of transition, this station exists to serve the incumbent government or prime minister. Although the television station allots time to opposition parties and leaders, the bulk of air time in RTSH news and information is always reserved for the prime minister and the government. In December 2009, the program *Fiks Fare*, of commercial station Top Channel, poked fun at RTSH by broadcasting more than 40 cases (within two months) when RTSH's main news edition had started with activities, inaugurations, or trips of the prime minister. The time devoted to pro-government news is larger than that devoted to opposition activities, but also the way the events are presented, selected, and interpreted clearly serves the government in power.

It is now common practice that with each government rotation, the overwhelming majority of the directors and the staff of the public newspapers turn over as well, and the panel said this illustrates the total dependence of the staff of public media on the government in power. The alignment in favor of the incumbent government has also limited the broadcasting of investigative anti-corruption programs, such as *Hapur*, which has denounced corruption across the political spectrum.

MULTIPLE NEWS SOURCES PROVIDE CITIZENS WITH RELIABLE AND OBJECTIVE NEWS.

PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES INDICATORS:

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

Private news agencies are fairly undeveloped in Albania, while even the services of the state news agency, ATSH, which offers print news bulletins and photos online, tend to be avoided by commercial newspapers—not only because of the expense, but also because the quality is considered poor. Some news websites are coming on to the scene, such as *Balkan Web*, which is, however, modest compared with the websites of neighboring countries. Albanian media tend to prepare their news in-house rather than buy it from domestic agencies. The opposite is also true: in some cities, there are journalists and reporters who work much like news agencies, preparing and broadcasting news for several newspapers and televisions at the same time. "One correspondent in the southern city of Gjirokastra works for all the possible media," said Goga.

In the meantime, regarding world news, the media refer to foreign news agencies on a daily basis. "Albania is a very small country; hence, it is very difficult for several domestic news agencies to function when even domestic media favor the services of international agencies," said Ulqini. Albanian media do generally cite news agency resources, both domestic and foreign, as sources for the information presented.

Almost all commercial media, not just important stations based in the capital, produce their own news editions. "Commercial media produce tons of news, and such a thing appears to be their main ambition at a time when we would want them to produce other things apart from news," said Lani. Exceptions can be made for some very small television stations in some small cities. The latter, in their daily broadcasting, rely more on purchased programs (movies, documentaries, music) rather than on programs produced on their own. However, most local media produce their own news editions, which are well-followed by local audiences.

The news programs of independent media are essentially different from news programs prepared in the public media, because they are not constantly pro-government. They tend to be more pluralistic and open to critical thinking, and present information that the public media tend to censor.

Production of other programs is more typical and plentiful for big capital-based stations. Such important stations as Top Channel have managed to produce soap operas as well as shows, documentaries, or studio debates.

Generally speaking, media ownership is transparent. However, there is no specific law that regulates the problem of media ownership transparency. Albania has a modern system of business registration, and anyone can receive information on the ownership of a medium on the website of the National Center of Registration. However, problems still linger. According to most of the panelists, the problem

in Albania is that the uncertainty of how media outlets are financed. "The problem of transparency has been displaced from transparency of ownership to transparency of media financing," said Lani. To Zogaj, even the issue of ownership transparency remains unclear; in some cases, the owner of a television station is known to be one individual, while the law requires a television station to have three owners.

Meanwhile, it cannot be said that there has been a serious consolidation and concentration process in the media market, although such tendencies can be spotted. Panelists said that if, in the future, poorer, local media go bankrupt, the problem of media concentration in the capital could sharpen. The largest and most powerful media in the country are in the capital, and the panelists found it problematic that they own powerful business groups focused on construction and commerce as well. Foreign investments in Albania's media market remain minimal. Panelists could only point to an investment made years ago by the Italian media company in producing a daily newspaper and a local television station, and, during 2009, a German media company's offer to become a co-owner of Vizion+ television.

According to most of the panelists, Albanian media report on a wide array of social issues related to gender, ethnicity, social conventions, religion, and sexual orientation. However, to some of the panelists, the reporting of some problems (for example, sexual orientation) remains more limited, not so much due to resistance from government, owners, or businesses, but mainly due to public prejudices. According to Yllka Kamenica, a freelance journalist, "the topic of homosexuality remains almost taboo for most Albanian media outlets."

However, the majority of panelists observed that there are no concerns regarding reporting on minorities. "From the legal point of view, and in practice, I do not think that the media deserve criticism regarding the minorities," said Ulqini. The panelists stressed that in many regions in the country, such as Gjirokastër, Sarandë, Delvinë, Korçë, Pogradec, Kukës, and Shkodër, there are minority-language media outlets. Also, while there is not a Greek-language Albanian television station, public-television branches in the districts broadcast in minority languages (including Greek) during several parts of the day. However, the panelists shared the opinion that minority media tend to be active mostly in areas inhabited by the minorities. Last year's panelists commented that the legal freedom for minority media was not accompanied by necessary financing; they also said the state does not allocate any financial support to the minority media—and that is still the case. However, the panelists noted that the state does not allocate any financial support for any media at all.

OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Albania Objective Score: 1.73

This objective remained roughly the same compared to last year. According to comments, the stagnation in score demonstrates that media outlets and their supporting companies strive to be efficient, professional businesses, but very few—perhaps just two or three of the biggest commercial stations in the capital—have managed a profit. In spite of attempts to improve management, the advertising environment is poor and media are struggling. According to Tela, editor-in-chief of *Panorama*, which currently enjoys the highest circulation in the country, "only two or three television stations and newspapers manage to make any profit, while the rest of the media are unprofitable and cannot survive without external financial support."

In Albania, many media outlets have started to operate through advertising agencies rather than directly with advertisers. Advertising revenues are distributed disproportionately and concentrated in the capital, as the most powerful businesses and media are based there. The smaller cities in the most distant and poorest areas are in a difficult financial position. Advertising remains the main source of income, even at a time when circulation numbers remain quite low. Though total annual advertising revenue is increasing (the market is about €45 million per year), it still is too low to sustain the media. "Although things have changed, the advertising market in Albania continues to be just one-tenth of the Croatian market," said Lani. Consequently, all newspapers and most television stations survive not on advertising revenue, subscriptions, or sales, but on monthly subsidies from the other businesses of media owners.

The roundtable concluded that this relationship has increased influence of owners on editorial policies and, indirectly, fostered the media's dependence on politics and the government. According to Kurti, commercial media are oriented toward profit and efficiency and try to employ, at least in key positions, professionals who can attract a greater audience and, consequently, more advertising revenue. To Ulqini, "the media and the companies that support them have not yet managed to work as professional and efficient businesses." Meanwhile, for other panelists, the fundamental problem is that media will find it harder to survive in a formal financial context. "I find it hard to believe that a serious media organization in Albania can survive without financial support," said Zogaj. One member of the Parliamentary Media

Commission stated that in all the financial balances submitted by newspapers and audiovisual media to the NCRT, “up to 50 percent of expenditures were uncovered and unaccounted for.” Such expenses are covered by businesses calculating that such expenditures will be rewarded in better relations with the public, politics, and power earned through a more compliant media. Other panelists underlined the possibility that these expenses might be financed by dirty money. “I think that the 50 percent that is not accounted for in the media balances is a source of dirty money, such as drugs and other trafficking,” said Ulqini, likewise a longstanding member of the Parliamentary Media Commission.

According to the panelists, there is no real financial diversification for Albanian media that might prevent undue editorial influence of a single advertising client or financial source. The classical example is the mobile telecommunications companies. It is well known that these companies are tightly integrated with media as paying advertisers, and they have significant editorial influence, thwarting, for instance, attempts to report the high tariffs they apply. This influence has not gone unnoticed by other financing sources or advertising clients. As for public television TVSH, funding comes solely from the government, and this relationship is clearly evident in editorial policies that adopt a government perspective.

Subscriptions remain very low. According to Tela, the most widely circulated daily in the country (with 23,000 copies distributed daily), only 400 are paid subscriptions. The people prefer to buy newspapers in the morning rather than wait for the afternoon subscription to arrive.

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

BUSINESS MANAGEMENT INDICATORS:

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

Print media prices have remained steady. Some newspapers, like *Panorama*, have lower prices and higher circulations. Some dailies, like *Shqip*, are priced higher and have lower circulation. Both newspapers, however, seem to have found a satisfactory equilibrium between price and circulation.

Though the government does not subsidize the media, the panel raised concerns that there may be secret subsidizing of media close to the government. “The prime minister has promised that there will be no government advertising in order to minimize government influence on media. Despite this promise, he has allowed the financing of production of spots that are distributed among the media in a clientelist manner,” said Kurti.

Meanwhile, some panelists stressed that the government is no longer the main source of advertisement for the media. To Tela, “commercial advertising tends to increase with each coming year in relation to state advertising.” According to Lani, “the ratio of state advertising to commercial advertising favors commercial advertising, unlike Macedonia, where the government covers a larger percentage of the advertising market.”

Luftim Vani, owner of the Mati television station, stressed a different point: the government’s influence on commercial advertisers. According to him, when a medium is too critical, the government not only does not buy advertisements, but also influences commercial advertisers to advertise less in that medium. Thus, government influence is felt, indirectly but strongly, in self-censorship of editorial policies.

The largest media try to conduct market research to better tailor programming to the audience demands. In Albania, the trend still leans toward media carrying out their own audience testing; offers made by specialized research companies have not been very successful. Phone surveys are the preferred method; other methods remain underdeveloped. “All media outlets carry out their own market research and present their own findings to their advertising clients,” said Goga, noting that the practice is highly subjective. Because media conduct research independently, credibility is very low. As a result, advertisers are unsure of the efficiency of money they spend on advertising based on unreliable audience data.

The panel stressed that media operators, advertising agencies, and advertisers cannot agree on best practices for such research. Similarly, there are no independent research institutions respected by all parties.

OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

Albania Objective Score: 2.29

Though there was only a negligible decrease in this indicator, improvements have been sought for years now, and little has been achieved.

Trade associations of publishers and broadcasters are almost nonexistent. "Unless there is some ongoing problem with the government, media owners rarely gather in a roundtable for *ad hoc* causes," said Lani, a view supported by other panelists.

Regarding professional associations that protect the journalists' rights, the panelists expressed optimism. A positive influence has been the Union of Journalists of Albania, an association established with the financial support of UNDEF: "The only positive evaluation that can be given in this sense is for the Union of Journalists," said Tela. The panel observed that the union has focused on protesting violence against journalists and media from government or owners. The Union of Journalists is the only professional association of journalists that protested the firing of journalists without pay, as in the Arberia television case, for instance.

Panelists stressed that the duty of journalists' associations is not just reactionary, but also to apply political pressure on other problems, such as approval of law on media, decriminalizing defamation, or collective and individual contracts for journalists, to name a few. The overwhelming majority of journalists in Albania work illegally, without contracts. The reality in Albanian media is that the majority of journalists are employed just like people in the underground

SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS FUNCTION IN THE PROFESSIONAL INTERESTS OF INDEPENDENT MEDIA.

SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS INDICATORS:

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

economy. Journalists are vulnerable to pressure and interference from owners, politics, and corrupt businesses.

The panel noted that some civil-society organizations join journalists to lobby for freedom of speech. One of the most active is the Albanian Helsinki Committee. The support is rather select, however, and remains focused in the capital. The same can be said of NGOs in reviewing legal amendments on the media. Their involvement is in expertise, and there has been some cooperation with international organizations in drafting media laws. However, civic activism is lacking. The prevailing mentality is that the laws regulating the media are an internal affair and not societal, much less a concern of civil society. Therefore, a view that media laws are relevant to the broader freedom and democracy is missing.

The panelists noted that the number of journalism departments at Albanian universities has increased. "Of 33 universities that function in Albania, half have a journalism branch," said Ulqini. While the panel agreed on the quantitative increase of journalism education programs, questions remain about the quality of the program, which is still quite low. Most of the panelists shared Tela's opinion that "the qualitative level of graduates in journalism schools remains low," in part because the abilities of the trainers are low.

Meanwhile, panelists stressed that the Albanian Media Institute has been a source of quality training, compensating for the low-quality work of universities. This institution sent journalists abroad to high-quality training courses and increased the number of courses in Albania. UNDEF has also provided assistance to investigative journalism training in 2009, through Hapur and in special training for journalists in the districts. The topics most in need of training are anti-corruption, anti-trafficking, and investigative journalism.

The number of commercial printing houses in Albania has increased, but only two, based in Tirana, print newspapers. These two printing houses print some 40 newspapers, leading to technical problems with the quality of print. Both companies are managed as businesses and have become less charitable toward newspaper owners in recent years. Today, all printing must be paid for on delivery.

Newspaper distribution is commercial without subsidies from the state. Newspapers are available only in the cities and are not distributed in remote areas that are home to nearly half of the Albanian population.

List of Panel Participants

Lutfi Dervishi, journalist and freelance analyst, Tirana

Luftim Vani, owner, Mati television station, Mati

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

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

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

Gent Ibrahim, lawyer, Institute of Law Studies, Tirana

Yllka Kamenica, freelance journalist, Durrës

Genci Demiraj, owner, Amantia TV, Vlora

Aleksander Cipa, head, Union of Albanian Journalists, Tirana

Thanas Goga, marketing analyst, Tirana

Ilir Yzeiri, professor of journalism, University of Elbasan, Elbasan

Valbona Kurti, freelance analyst and journalist, Tirana

Preçe Zogaj, member, Parliamentary Commission on Mass Media, Tirana

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