

# ALBANIA



## MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX 2018

Tracking Development  
of Sustainable  
Independent Media  
Around the World



# ALBANIA

## AT A GLANCE

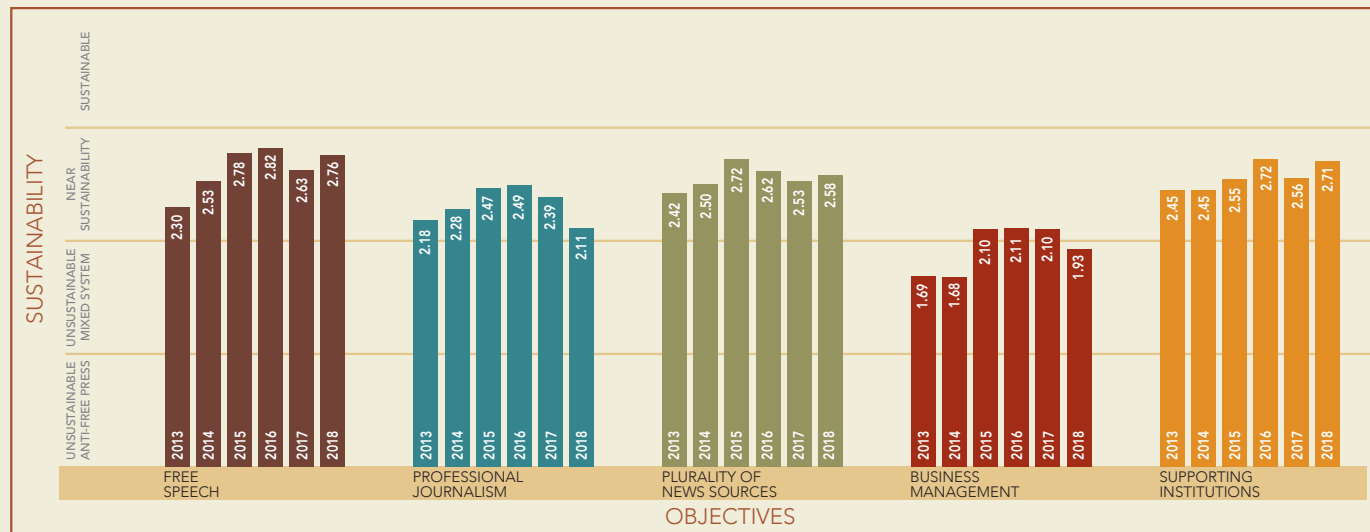
### GENERAL

- **Population:** 3,047,987 (2017 est. *CIA World Factbook*)
- **Capital city:** Tirana
- **Ethnic groups (% of population):** Albanian 82.6%, Greek 0.9%, other 1% (including Vlach, Roma, Macedonian, Montenegrin, and Egyptian), unspecified 15.5% (2011 est. *CIA World Factbook*)
- **Religions (% of population):** Muslim 56.7%, Roman Catholic 10%, Orthodox 6.8%, atheist 2.5%, Bektashi (a Sufi order) 2.1%, other 5.7%, unspecified 16.2% (2011 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- **Languages:** Albanian 98.8% (official), Greek 0.5%, other 0.6% (including Macedonian, Roma, Vlach, Turkish, Italian, and Serbo-Croatian), unspecified 0.1% (2011 est. *CIA World Factbook*)
- **GNI (2016-Atlas):** \$12 billion (*World Bank Development Indicators*, 2017)
- **GNI per capita (2016-PPP):** \$11,350 (*World Bank Development Indicators*, 2017)
- **Literacy rate:** 97.6% (2015 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- **President or top authority:** President Ilir Meta (since July 24, 2017)

### MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- **Number of active print outlets, radio stations, television stations, Internet news portals:** Print: 19 dailies (2017, Albanian Media Institute); Radio Stations: 1 national, 51 local, 4 community (2018, Audiovisual Media Authority), 1 public (in five channels), plus four local programs; TV Stations: 1 public (with 8 national channels), 5 national digital platforms and TV stations, 56 local TV stations, 2 satellite, 100 cable (2018, Audiovisual Media Authority); Internet News Portals: N/A
- **News agencies:** Albanian Telegraphic Agency (state-run)
- **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** €39 million (2017 est., *Monitor* magazine)
- **Internet users:** 2,016,516 (2016 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- **Newspaper circulation statistics:** N/A
- **Broadcast ratings:** N/A

### MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: ALBANIA



### SCORE KEY

**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.



Compared to last year, the objectives related to free speech, plurality of news sources, and supporting institutions experienced a slight increase, while the opposite was true for the objectives of professional journalism and business management. Overall score continues to drop, albeit slightly, going from 2.44 in 2017, to 2.42 in 2018. Economic crisis and management practices in Albanian media have had a heavy toll on finances and quality of reporting in media outlets.

**W**ith general elections scheduled for June 2017, political crisis wracked Albania during the first half of last year. In February, lawmakers from the opposition Democratic Party walked out of the parliament and announced that they would boycott the election unless a technocratic administration replaced the Socialist Party government in the run-up to the vote. The Democrats, later joined by other opposition parties, claimed that the government has ties to organized crime and to a boom in illegal cannabis cultivation, and was incapable of overseeing free and fair elections. The government called the protests a pretext for stalling judicial reforms demanded by the European Union as part of Albania's candidacy for membership.

After a three-month stalemate, in May the parties reached an internationally mediated agreement that cleared the way for the vote to take place. The balloting was postponed by a week, from June 18 to June 25, and the Democrats were given several ministerial posts, pending the election outcome. Opposition members returned to the parliament and legislative work resumed on creating vetting bodies for judges and other court staff. These steps were a key component of the reform process that has been a byword in Albanian politics since the country was granted EU candidate status in 2014. Lawmakers voted in members of the vetting institutions shortly before the election, in a move that EU leaders welcomed. The European

Commission said that it was prepared to recommend that the union formally open accession talks with Albania. A decision is expected in June 2018.

The June 25 vote returned the Socialists and Prime Minister Edi Rama to power. With that overall majority, the party mandate has been extended from the 2013 election. Judicial reform remains a priority for Rama's second term, but political feuding quickly resumed after the election, and the opposition has announced a new wave of protests.

Amid the political turmoil, the media situation in Albania remained relatively stable. The overall MSI score inched down from 2.44 to 2.42, but the panel found slight improvement in the areas of free speech, plurality of news sources, and supporting institutions. The lowered ratings for professional journalism and business management reflect an economic crisis in the industry, as major advertisers have steadily reduced media buys in recent years. The resulting strain on media finances has led to cutbacks in newsrooms and has fostered self-censorship. Outlets have become more dependent on owners with distinct political and economic interests. Those owners' hands were strengthened in 2017 with the implementation of court-mandated changes to media law that allow for greater concentration in the Albanian market.

**OBJECTIVE 1:  
FREEDOM OF  
SPEECH**

2.76

Albania's constitution and legislation guarantee freedom of speech and freedom of expression. The panel agreed that, in general, Albania has a favorable legal environment for media freedom. They noted, however, shortcomings in implementation of the laws, mainly from the judiciary. The legal framework of press protection has persistent gaps — particularly in the area of defamation. Civil cases around defamation, which is not fully decriminalized, often result in punishing sanctions. "Civil sanctions are rather high, and while defamation cases have mainly been between politicians, rather than involving media, this creates problematic jurisprudence," said Darian Pavli, an attorney specializing in media and human-rights law.

The highest-profile case of the past year was filed by appeals court judge Gjin Gjoni and his wife. They sued news websites Shqiptarja.com and Reporter.al (part of the regional network of the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, or BIRN) and two journalists from each outlet. The cases, still ongoing at the time of this writing, involve articles about Gjoni's personal wealth and investigations of his finances. The couple claims that the reporting has caused them "moral anguish," and they seek damages totaling €81,600 (\$101,000).<sup>1</sup> "A number of journalists and media in the country are facing civil

1 Erebara, Gjergj, "Albania Court Hears Judge's Lawsuit Against BIRN," Balkan Insight, July 5, 2017, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/hearing-starts-in-tirana-court-on-albanian-judge-claim-for-defamation-against-birn-albania-07-05-2017>.

lawsuits on defamation or damage of reputation, being pressured with high and non-proportional fines," said Aleksandra Bogdani of Reporter.al, who is a defendant in the Gjoni case, "Such lawsuits in Albania tend to establish a climate of pressure over media and journalists, due mainly to the fact that the arbiter, the judiciary system, suffers from corruption and politicization."

Some panelists said that judges tend to have little knowledge of how media work and of relevant case law from the European Court of Human Rights, stacking the deck against journalists facing defamation lawsuits. Still, rulings for plaintiffs are not automatic. Artan Rama, director of the now-defunct TV news program "Publicus," won a favorable ruling in a case brought by construction company Edil Al-It. Rama had written a Facebook post questioning the firm's winning tender to renovate the National Theater of Opera and Ballet in Tirana.<sup>2</sup> The verdict was significant in that it affirmed free-press protection for commentary on social media.

Albania's switchover to digital broadcasting picked up speed after a long period of stagnation. In January 2017, the national regulator Audiovisual Media Authority (AMA) granted the last of five national multiplex licenses for private operators. The process was slowed considerably by AMA's decision making and by court challenges to its digitization moves, panelists said. A few praised AMA for breaking through the dysfunction to finalize licensing, and for the late introduction of public broadcaster Radio Televizioni Shqiptar (RTSH) into the process. Aleksander Çipa, head of the Union of Albanian Journalists, said that including RTSH

2 "Victory for Freedom of Expression in Case against Artan Rama," Exit, December 1, 2017, <https://exit.al/en/2017/12/01/victory-for-freedom-of-expression-in-case-against-artan-rama/>.

will provide opportunities for local and regional stations on two public digital networks. According to the panelists, some skeptics said that the process cemented the dominance of established commercial operators in the digital era. But even they said they did not see regulators deny any licenses unfairly.

Panelists agreed that Albania has a relatively friendly legal framework for media businesses. The law sets no industry-specific tax or regulatory burdens on media. In fact, media receive some targeted tax breaks, such as an exemption from value-added tax on media equipment and newspaper sales. Access to the market is

**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.

## ALBANIA

free and media companies have no additional registration hurdles relative to other sectors, save for requirements for broadcast licenses. Zylyftar Bregu, a journalism lecturer at the University of Tirana and a member of AMA, said that in 2015 his department conducted a survey of 37 owners and managers at major outlets. The survey showed that the respondents are satisfied with the business environment and do not suggest any legal changes.

**“A number of journalists and media in the country are facing civil lawsuits on defamation or damage of reputation, being pressured with high and non-proportional fines,” said Aleksandra Bogdani of Reporter.al, who is a defendant in the Gjoni case, “Such lawsuits in Albania tend to establish a climate of pressure over media and journalists, due mainly to the fact that the arbiter, the judiciary system, suffers from corruption and politicization.”**

Some panelists said that, while media in general receive favorable legislative treatment, selective implementation can tilt the competitive balance. “The rules of the game once you are in are not the same for everyone,” said Alfred Lela, director of the Politiko news website, “This favoritism ruins free and fair competition between media.” Ornella Liperi, editor in chief of business and economics magazine *Monitor*, said that tax authorities do not always pressure outlets that fail to fully pay their taxes.

Crimes against journalists are rare, but so are arrests of perpetrators. Elvi Fundo, who heads online outlet Citynews.al and Radio Best, was

physically assaulted by two people in March 2017. Police identified and caught one of the assailants, but it remains unknown who ordered the beating. Panelists said that the climate for media freedom has not been helped by prime minister Rama’s increasingly harsh rhetoric against media and journalists. Çipa drew attention to the vulnerable situation of reporters for local media in small towns. These journalists are under more immediate and direct pressure than their peers at bigger outlets or in the capital.

Legislation fails to fully guarantee the independence of regulatory bodies, such as AMA and the RTSH steering council. Their members are appointed by the parliament and subject to partisan pressures, panelists said. Lutfi Dervishi, a prominent freelance journalist, said that the 2016 election of RTSH’s general director is illustrative. To overcome a deadlocked steering council, the ruling Socialists pushed through legal amendments that cleared the way for the former editor of the official party newspaper to head RTSH. “This was the classic case where [council] members did not judge as professionals, but followed decisions that were made outside the institution,” Dervishi said.

Valbona Sulce, a former journalist who sits on the RTSH council, challenged this view. She said that members are nominated by civil-society groups before being elected by parliamentary parties, and make their own decisions. However, she commented that the council should be more transparent about its decision-making process.

Several panelists cited the drafting and approval of RTSH editorial guidelines as a step forward. They also said that the 2017 election was the first in which media monitors gave RTSH positive marks for its coverage. Formerly clearly pro-government, RTSH “is now an open network, judging from its news programs,” said Remzi Lani,

executive director of the Albanian Media Institute. Çipa agreed regarding the national network, but said that local public stations have issues with editorial independence, including firings of journalists for political reasons and unfair hiring practices.

### OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

2.11

**Very few outlets in Albania maintain a high standard of professional reporting, and most exhibit serious shortcomings, according to the panel. “I really miss reading and seeing news that has two sources,” Dervishi said, “With a few exceptions, like BIRN or *Monitor*, they mostly only have one source.” Panelists laid the blame not on journalists’ professionalism per se but on the conditions in which they work, including staff shortages, heavy workloads, competitive and fiscal burdens, and poor labor relations.**

The boom in online media has further lowered quality, according to the panelists. “Being under financial pressure, with very few and often unqualified reporters, online media have almost undone any professional level of reporting that traditional media have achieved,” Bogdani said. “They often publish news without any sources and copy news from one another, often publishing unverifiable, fake news in addition to violating copyright.”

Ethical standards are on the decline, panelists said. The problem is exacerbated by the development of online media as well as the pervasiveness of public relations material that politicians, parties, and commercial firms produce. Reporters are growing more reliant on these sources, Bregu said. “Journalists are increasingly

## 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).

conveying the information as they get it from press offices, rather than further researching or even just verifying it.”

Self-regulatory mechanisms have not improved the ethical picture. The Albanian Media Institute developed a code of ethics more than a decade ago, but it is up to individual journalists to decide whether and how to follow the code. The Albanian Media Council, a self-regulation initiative launched in late 2015 by a group of journalists, is off to a slow start. However, it did open an office and begin holding meetings in late 2017 thanks to support from the international donor support, including UNESCO.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> “With UNESCO’s support, the Albanian Media Council becomes operational,” UNESCO, January 30, 2016, <https://en.unesco.org/news/unesco-s-support-albanian-media-council-becomes-operational>.

“It seems a paradox that at a time when the need to respect ethics is stronger than ever due to weakening of professional standards in online media, the implementation of ethical standards remains as problematic as always,” Dervishi said.

The Council of Complaints, a part of AMA, is the only body formally established to address public grievances against media, specifically broadcasters. The council has imposed a few fines but also has experienced considerable pushback. “The reaction of media to the fines has been fierce, degenerating into personal attacks against the chairwoman of the council, which indicates the tolerance media have in this regard,” Pavli said.

Self-censorship among journalists is widespread and becoming normalized, panelists said, with ownership routinely influencing reporters’ work. “In my experience interviewing media directors and reporters, none ever say they have not self-censored,” Bogdani observed. “Self-censorship has worsened, and it is one of the main problems we have at the moment.”

However, panel members debated on whether self-censorship prevents media from exposing the truth. “Self-censorship lies in the fact that you, as a media outlet, publish truths that are only in your own interest,” Lela said, “What goes against you is published by the other media, who have interests different from yours. So, if we are judging the overall information published, it is good. But if we judge media professionalism, we are not doing that well.”

Pay in the media sector is generally lower than the national norm, especially at the local and regional levels. The best paid journalists are principally editors and analysts at big national outlets. According to data from the Union of Albanian Journalists, these workers earn \$550 to \$600 a month — comparable to the \$580 average for public sector workers. More typically, salaries

average \$300 at larger outlets and \$150 to \$200 in local media. “Local reporters are in great [financial] difficulty because their salaries are very low, and most newsrooms do not cover the expenses they incur during the reporting process,” Çipa said.

Worsening the problem, about 60 percent of media companies in Albania delay payment of salaries —sometimes for as long as six months, according to the union. Sometimes outlets shut down without paying the arrears, costing journalists several months of compensation. Numerous outlets do not declare compensation for journalists in financial and tax filings, which can undercut media employees’ social security and health insurance benefits. These labor and pay issues significantly affect journalists’ motivation and the quality of their work, panelists said.

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Panel members said news and political shows outnumber entertainment programs. The imbalance is due to the broadcast of several all-news channels, as well as the prevalence of current affairs programs and talk shows, which air nightly across Albanian television. “There is no other country in the world where television broadcasts political shows in prime

## ALBANIA

time from Monday to Friday. We can even say that politics has become the main entertainment now," said Dervishi.

Media endeavor to cover a full range of topics, with social issues, crime, the economy, and health garnering significant attention, the panel said. Investigative reporting is gaining traction, particularly with BIRN and other online outlets and with TV programs such as "Boom" on Ora News. "Fiks Fare" on Top Channel and TV Klan's "Stop" mix investigation with satire. The panel also noted the launch of the first-ever investigative program on RTSH.

By and large, media outlets possess satisfactory equipment and journalists have sufficient technical means to do their work. A gap exists between national and local media in this regard, the panel said, but the transition to digital transmission is expected to improve the situation.

### OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

2.58

**News and information sources are plentiful in Albania, with 19 daily newspapers, more than 100 national and local television and radio channels, and a booming online news presence. In fact, the prevailing view on the panel is that the media sector has too many outlets relative to the country's size and population. "While it is true that not all reports are reliable and unbiased, the pluralism of sources of information is such that the truth gets to the public after all," said Valbona Kurti, editor of "Stop."**

However, some panelists said that quantity does not produce a pluralism of viewpoints. Dervishi said that much of the news output reflects sources

and information repeated across different media. "The information provided often is not qualitative and is useless to most of the population," Liperi commented, "There is a high concentration on politicians, with journalists often distancing themselves from the real news, which leads to weaker coverage of reality in the country, in spite of serious attempts by television stations to cover social problems."

Albanian citizens have no obstacles in accessing domestic or foreign sources of information. Panelists said they know of no instances of the government blocking access to any online or traditional outlet. A significant increase in Internet penetration in recent years<sup>4</sup> has further expanded the public's access to media and led to an increase in the number of online news outlets. The general population, politicians, and media outlets widely use social media, especially Facebook.

The law places no market restrictions on Internet-service providers. Online media are not required to register; they operate with absolute freedom, and with an accompanying lack of accountability. The only practical limitations to Internet access are cost, illiteracy, or lack of electricity — all marginal factors, panelists agreed.

The public broadcaster, RTSH, lacks credibility with Albanians, despite attempts by a succession of management teams to improve its image. Longstanding questions about its independence and relevancy have taken a heavy toll. The controversial 2016 election of a general director viewed as close to the prime minister solidified perceptions that the public broadcaster serves the government and the party in power. However, panelists said that this

<sup>4</sup> "Albania—Internet penetration," Index Mundi, accessed March 13, 2018, <https://www.indexmundi.com/facts/albania/internet-penetration>.

view is not borne out based on RTSH's coverage over the past year. They said they have discerned no bias in its political reporting and noted its efforts to improve news programming quality. "I have changed [my] opinion on the news produced by RTSH, as I no longer see any partisan element," said Lani, "The problem now with RTSH ... is not that the politicians want to use it, but rather that it is generally ignored."

The only news agency in the traditional sense is the state-run Albanian Telegraphic Agency, which is used little by private media. With the popularization of news websites, the distinction has become blurred between news services and other media. Numerous online portals refer to themselves as news agencies and all media freely use external

### 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.
- ▶ Independent broadcast media produce their own news programs.
- ▶ Citizens' access to domestic or international media is not restricted.
- ▶ Transparency of media ownership allows consumers to judge objectivity of news; media ownership is not concentrated in a few conglomerates.
- ▶ State or public media reflect the views of the entire political spectrum, are nonpartisan, and serve the public interest.
- ▶ A broad spectrum of social interests are reflected and represented in the media, including minority-language information sources.
- ▶ Independent news agencies gather and distribute news for print and broadcast media.
- ▶ Broadcast ratings, circulation figures, and Internet statistics are reliable.

## ALBANIA

news providers. All media have access to and widely use international agencies, albeit usually by violating intellectual property rights.

Most media in the country create their own content, but panelists said that it is often difficult to tell whether material was genuinely produced in the newsroom or served up by actors with agendas. “Today it is political parties, political leaders, and state institutions that produce news rather than the media, which often becomes a mere conveyor belt for this readily produced news,” said Dervishi. It has become so common for news sites to copy and paste material from other outlets that even a report legitimately written by a journalist might never be

**“Today it is political parties, political leaders, and state institutions that produce news rather than the media, which often becomes a mere conveyor belt for this readily produced news,” said Dervishi.**

credited to the original writer. Kurti countered that while this is true for political coverage, it would be unfair to say the same of reporting on crime, social issues, and cultural topics.

Transparency of ownership for traditional media is no longer a problem. All print and broadcasting companies are registered with the National Business Center and the database is free, accessible, and easily searchable online. “Media owners are generally identified for the public and it is generally easy for the public to also assess their political affiliation,” Liperi said. However, many other aspects of the market remain opaque, including sources of financing, audience data (e.g. ratings or circulation), and advertising revenue. “The problem is that we now know who owns what, but we still do not know who pays whom,” Lani said.

Online news outlets are almost completely non-transparent. They are not obliged to register with authorities, and few sites provide information on staff, physical addresses, or other identifiers. Ascertaining their ownership is virtually impossible for the public or the media community itself.

Panelists expect consolidation in the broadcasting market with the Constitutional Court’s nullification of Article 62/3 of the law on audiovisual media. This law had prohibited any single owner from holding more than 40 percent of shares in an outlet. Of the five national digital-TV licenses that AMA granted, four went to the country’s two main broadcasting companies. “With the abolition of Article 62, we have paved the way for the consolidation of media conglomerates and have legalized media-market concentration,” Lani said.

Panel members said that official bodies and special-interest groups do not attempt to hinder reporting on issues related to minorities, ethnicity, or gender and sexual orientation. Coverage of such topics is typically superficial. But panelists noted that RTSH has launched thematic channels focused on music, sports, documentaries, and other interests. They said they view this programming as steps toward greater diversity.

The government does not provide subsidies for minority-language media, but in this respect, such outlets are in the same boat as other private media, none of which receive public support. Çipa said that his union has identified some three dozen online outlets “run by minorities in their own language, which is a significant achievement.” He added that RTSH has expanded its minority-language offerings, which until recently only included programs in Greek and Macedonian. Programs in Montenegrin and Aromanian are now available.

Media in Albania cover local, national, and foreign news, but politics and developments in the

capital predominate. “There is very little information on what happens outside Tirana,” Liperi said. “There is not much field reporting, and the focus is mostly on politics.” The local outlet problems with money and professionalism are significant obstacles to improving community-level reporting, according to Bogdani. Local journalism “is the weakest link in the chain of information production in Albania,” he said.

### OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

1.93

**Media financing has been a mystery in Albania for many years. The media sector has numerous outlets across all platforms, and this is hailed as an indicator of media pluralism and information access. How to operate and survive in such a small market, however, remains elusive.**

Several panelists remarked on the complications related to ownership. “The large number of newspapers, televisions, or portals in a small country like Albania can also be interpreted as a flaw of the media market in general, which does not survive thanks to readership or audience, but as a result of the direct or indirect interests of the media owners,” Bogdani said. While business and editorial operations are formally divided, Kurti said, “even the media that are considered serious are guided by their interest of the moment. In other words, editorial policy follows the interest of the owner.” Liperi agreed, adding, “Keeping in mind that television remains the most influential medium, it can easily be used by owners to pressure advertisers or obtain specific favors, at the expense of independent and professional news reporting.”

Panelists listed several sources of revenue



## ALBANIA

available to media: commercial and public advertising, subscriptions, pay-per-view programs, and support from owners' other businesses. "I believe that the financial resources are there, but I also believe that each one of them has an impact on editorial policy," Bogdani said, "Advertisers come to an outlet depending on the editorial policy applied, so there is influence in this regard."

No official data have been gathered on the advertising market, but unofficial estimates put ad revenue in 2017 at about €39 million (\$48.4 million). "Albania has the lowest advertising revenue per capita in the region, and the trend has been a decrease in such funding," Liperi said.

Print media have been hit hardest, with advertisers increasingly shifting their spending to online media. Television receives the lion's share of advertising, an estimated 70 percent, but fierce

competition and high operational costs make TV stations highly vulnerable to market shifts.

Advertising revenue makes up 40-60 percent of turnover for print media, and the figure is higher for television, Liperi said, citing her magazine's coverage of the industry. Banks, hospitals, telecommunications companies, and insurance firms are among the biggest advertisers. In a small market, their money is essential to media survival, and their sway — whether to encourage favorable coverage or forestall criticism — has been well documented. Last year, a Tirana hospital sued an online newspaper after it reported on complaints by dialysis patients about their care. Court proceedings revealed that the hospital offered the site financial support in the form of positive paid content, which the outlet refused. "Big advertisers, including banks, mobile companies, or private hospitals, are untouchable, and negatively affect media's editorial policy," Bogdani said.

Dervishi said that the problem is not merely behind-the-scenes quid pro quos. "There is massive product placement in TV shows related to new products or services, and these are constantly served as journalistic reports, rather than being marked as advertising. This is supposed to be hidden advertising, but it has become screaming advertising," he said.

The state does not subsidize media, and government advertising has decreased sharply in recent years. "In Albania, the government is not the first, second, or even the fifth-biggest advertiser," Lani said. Still, it uses those dwindling means for clientelist ends, panel members said, rewarding media for favorable coverage or even a lack of criticism. A few panelists said that they have been told of instances of officials suggesting to advertisers that they steer spending to outlets that support the government.

In addition, some companies that have secured

government money earmarked for events and publicity campaigns are channeling the funds to favored outlets. As private entities, these companies are under no obligation to be transparent.

Several advertising agencies are operating in Albania. A few have grown very strong and become regional agencies, expanding into Macedonia and Kosovo, Çipa said. Some have entered the media competition themselves, establishing their own newspapers and news websites.

**While business and editorial operations are formally divided, Kurti said, "even the media that are considered serious are guided by their interest of the moment. In other words, editorial policy follows the interest of the owner."**

Information on media consumption is sparse. Major companies, primarily those in television, conduct market studies and audience research, as do big advertisers such as banks and telecoms. Companies use the data to better target their ads, but the findings are not available to the public. Two companies measure TV ratings, but their data is considered unreliable, as they use small audience samples and different methodologies that produce widely varying results. Newspapers do not reveal circulation numbers, and websites do not publish data on their traffic.

### 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.

**OBJECTIVE 5:  
SUPPORTING  
INSTITUTIONS**

2.71

Albania has no legal obstacles to establishing trade associations that represent media interests. The Association of Albanian Electronic Media is the only such group operating currently. Its activity is sporadic and usually in reaction to political and legal developments that affect media owners. The latest such instance was before the June 2017 elections, while the governing party and opposition party were in the process of amending the law on political parties. The association had lobbied unsuccessfully against a provision that required broadcasters to air political advertisements for free. The organization acts to defend owners' economic interests, but its work is "very negligible" on matters of media freedom and quality, Liperi said.

Numerous professional journalist associations are registered in Albania, but most are dormant. The most active group is the Union of Albanian Journalists, which "has established a good tradition of responding to violations of media freedom and labor rights," Sulce said. The union has about 800 members and branches across the country but is financially constrained. It levies minimal dues and only a small percentage of members pay them.

Panelists mentioned the Association of Professional Journalists of Albania (APJA), a group that was founded in the early 1990s but had long been inactive. With help from the European Federation of Journalists, which it joined in 2015, APJA has been revived. Its members aim to play a more active role in protecting media freedom in the country.

According to the panel, professional groups

and NGOs are responsive to violations of media independence and free expression but have limited sway. "Associations of publishers and journalists are not highly influential when it comes to fundamental problems media face in Albania," Bogdani said. They are more successful when acting to change or properly enforce media legislation. For example, NGOs had a major hand in the amendment of laws on defamation and freedom of information in 2012 and 2014, respectively, and have actively monitored its implementation.

Journalism education is mostly limited to public universities in Tirana and major regional centers

**"Associations of publishers and journalists are not highly influential when it comes to fundamental problems media face in Albania," Bogdani said.**

such as Shkodra and Elbasan. Their programs tend to favor theory over practical newsroom skills, panelists said. Private universities offer primarily communications degrees with a focus on public relations. Bregu said that internal research from the University of Tirana shows that 70-75 percent of practicing journalists in Albania have a journalism degree. Sulce commented that the media community expects working journalists to be so credentialed, but "the curriculum does not entirely respond to this need."

The Albanian Media Institute and other NGOs offer short-term training programs for journalists and journalism students. Declining donor interest has made such opportunities rarer in recent years. Few media offer in-house training for their reporters. "There is a paradox in Albanian media," Bogdani said. "Investment in technology, especially in television, has been very advanced, while investment

in professional journalists, in in-depth reporting or investigative reporting, has decreased."

Panelists agreed that what training is available can only have so much impact on newsrooms characterized by limited human resources, heavy workloads, and considerable self-censorship. In Albanian media, some panel members said, merit is not seen as key to career advancement, so most journalists are indifferent to professional development.

The printing market is liberalized and apolitical, if tending toward concentration. The relative dearth of printing houses can drive up prices, but newspaper and magazine companies are free to choose where to print. The law places no

**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.
- ▶ Short-term training and in-service training programs allow journalists to upgrade skills or acquire new skills.
- ▶ Sources of newsprint NGOs support free speech and independent media.
- ▶ Quality journalism degree programs that provide substantial practical experience exist.
- ▶ Printing facilities are in private hands, apolitical, and unrestricted.
- ▶ Channels of media distribution (kiosks, transmitters, Internet) are private, apolitical, and unrestricted.
- ▶ Information and communication technology infrastructure sufficiently meets the needs of media and citizens.

## ALBANIA

restrictions on the purchase or import of materials for publication.

Print media distribution is effectively a monopoly. The company that owns Top Channel, one of the biggest TV stations, controls the kiosk network. However, panelists said that the lack of a competitive kiosk market does not affect newspaper and magazine sales, as the monopoly network does not deny access to any publications. Newspaper distribution is weaker in rural areas, but this presents little practical problem for readers, as most content is available online.

The infrastructure of information and communication technology is advanced, and Internet penetration has increased rapidly. Problems with the quality of media content persist, the panelists agreed, but citizens have no technological obstacles to access.

### List of Panel Participants

**Aleksandra Bogdani**, journalist, *Reporter.al*, Tirana

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

**Aleksander Çipa**, chair, Union of Albanian Journalists, Tirana

**Genc Demiraj**, owner, One TV, Vlora

**Lutfi Dervishi**, freelance journalist, Tirana

**Valbona Kurti**, editor-in-chief, "Stop," Tirana

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

**Alfred Lela**, director, *Politiko.al*, Tirana

**Ornela Liperi**, editor-in-chief, *Monitor*, Tirana

**Darian Pavli**, media-law expert, Tirana

**Valbona Sulce**, member, Radio Televizioni Shqiptar steering council, Tirana

**Luftim Vani**, owner, Mati TV, Mat

### Moderator & Author

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*The panel discussion was convened on December 20, 2017.*