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ALBANIA

Albanian media did not have an easy year in 2008. In addition to the global economic crisis affecting Albania, political parties have returned to trying to control and misuse the media to support narrow political ambitions. As the parliamentary elections of June 2009 draw closer, such attempts are becoming more visible. Many television stations and newspapers have already aligned with one political faction, the voices of independent media are fewer and fewer, and independence is increasingly less welcome in the media. While all political factions are endeavoring to control the media, hegemony belongs to the two main parties: the ruling Democratic Party (DP) and the opposition Socialist Party (SP).

In 2008, the government's retribution against media and journalists criticizing the government, particularly over allegations of corruption, became more severe. There has been pressure on critical journalists and even cases of their family members being fired from public service. The journalists' community in Albania, the Union of Albanian Journalists, and other associations found themselves protesting against the January 2009 eviction and police siege instigated by Prime Minister Sali Berisha and Minister of Economy Genc Ruli against the daily newspaper *Tema*, which had recently run a number of articles that were rather critical of Prime Minister Berisha and his relatives over alleged corruption. Against this backdrop of political pressure, the phenomenon of self-censorship by media and journalists has become more evident.

Political developments have not favored freedom, either. In April 2008 Albania received an invitation for NATO membership. However, contrary to government claims, conventional wisdom in the country holds that this was more a function of the strategic needs of NATO in the still turbulent Balkans region than of democratic reforms. The March 2008 explosion at a military depot that was dismantling old ammunition resulted in the deaths of 26 people and the devastation of several villages—adding to existing skepticism of government competence, particularly because of allegations that some of the ammunition was being illegally trafficked instead of being dismantled.

To this day, several sudden amendments to the constitution remain quite controversial. These amendments, backed by both SP and DP but opposed by smaller parties, lacked transparency or opportunity for public input. By severely affecting the separation of power, these amendments have led to a fear that the formula to be implemented will tend to favor an autocratic political establishment at the expense of freedoms and rights—media freedom and free speech included.

In general, MSI panelists' scores show little to no change this year. The overall score is nearly the same as last year, with some movement in individual objectives. All objectives except Objective 4 (business management) fell very slightly, but none more than 0.10 points. A slight gain of 0.16 in Objective 4 allowed the overall score to remain unchanged.

# ALBANIA AT A GLANCE

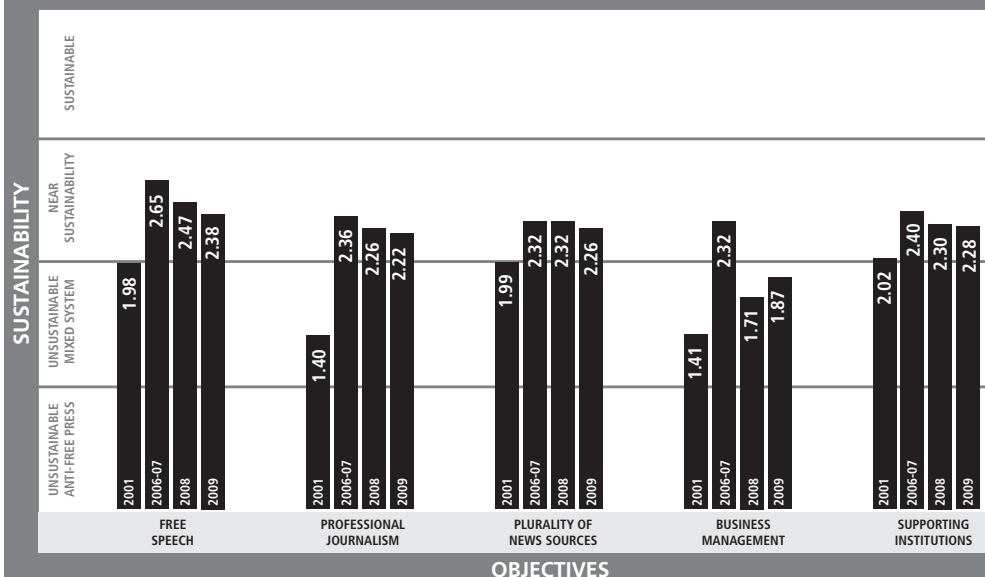
## GENERAL

- > **Population:** 3,619,778 (July 2008 est., *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*)
- > **Religions (% of population):** Muslim 70%, Albanian Orthodox 20%, Roman Catholic 10% (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Languages (% of population):** Albanian (official – derived from Tosk dialect), Greek, Vlach, Romani, Slavic dialects (*CIA World Factbook*)
- > **GNI (2007-Atlas):** \$10.46 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2008)
- > **GNI per capita (2007-PPP):** \$6,580 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2008)
- > **Literacy rate:** 98.7% (male 99.2%, female 98.3%) (2001 census, *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **President or top authority:** President of the Republic Bamir Topi (since July 24, 2007)

## MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- > **Number of active print outlets, radio stations, television stations:** Print: 27; Radio: 53; Television Stations: 67 (Source: Albanian Media Institute, National Council of Radio-Television)
- > **Newspaper circulation statistics:** Total yearly circulation is about 25.5 million; individual circulation statistics for newspapers not available (Albanian Media Institute)
- > **Broadcast ratings:** N/A
- > **News agencies:** Albanian Telegraphic Agency (state owned), Tir-Fax (private), AFP (French Representative Office), Associated Press (Representative Office), Reuters (Representative Office) (OSCE Office, Tirana)
- > **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** Approximately \$28 million
- > **Internet usage:** 471,200 (2006 est., *CIA World Factbook*)

## MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: ALBANIA



Annual scores for 2002 through 2005 are available online at [http://www.irex.org/programs/MSI\\_EUR/archive.asp](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: 2.38

Most Objective 1 indicators showed little change compared to last year; however, Indicator 4, crimes against journalists, did show a significant drop. Minor improvements in other indicators resulted in an overall objective score of 2.38, slightly lower than last year's 2.47. As with last year, a particular weakness was Indicator 5 (preferential legal treatment for state media)—its score was more than a point lower than the overall objective score. Also similar to last year, panelists gave scores nearly a full point higher to Indicators 8 and 9, media access to foreign news sources and access to the journalism profession.

The panelists stated that 2008 brought no changes to the social and legal norms that guarantee freedom of expression on the one hand and their implementation on the other. The constitution protects freedom of expression and legislation meets European standards. However, the panelists stated that there has been no progress regarding several old proposals on the improvement of the law on access to information or criminal libel.

The panelists also stated that any assessment of freedom of speech in Albanian society must include how society and its institutions react to the problems addressed in the media. "Press and media in general investigate and denounce corruption and other affairs, and then nothing happens," stated a concerned Iliri Yzeiri.

This statement, also supported by other panelists, addresses the issue that media success in an open society hinges upon larger systemic issues. For example, if law enforcement institutions do not follow up on crimes addressed in the media, then not only is the fight against corruption in danger, but the public may begin to lose faith in the media.

Unfortunately, this is precisely what is happening in Albania. Civil discourse is currently suffering from the lack of an active struggle against corruption by prosecutors and judges. However, a survey of public perception carried out by the Institute for Development Research and Alternatives in 2008 indicated that Albanians rank the media as the institution that is at the top of the fight against corruption, while law enforcement and the judiciary themselves continue to be perceived as some of the most corrupt institutions in the country.

Last year, the licensing of TV Ora was broadly regarded as a pro-government act by the licensing and regulatory body, the National Council of Radio and Television (KKRT). However, panelists showed no concerns regarding media

licensing in 2008. This is also due to the simple fact that no licensing took place. Meanwhile, the relations between KKRT and some media outlets opposing the government became strained. This led panelists to perceive a strong influence by the authorities on KKRT's decision-making. A typical example was that of the fine that KKRT imposed on News 24 television for broadcasting an advertisement by political movement G99. The content of this advertisement opposed another broadcast by the government. The "counter-advertisement" was broadcast by other television stations but the fine was only imposed on News 24. This sparked accusations, including by the Union of Albanian Journalists (UGSH), that KKRT was being used as a government tool for punishing a media outlet that criticized the government. According to Aleksandër Çipa, journalist and chairman of the UGSH, "KKRT has fallen prey to politics and other influences." To Çipa, the fact that TV Arbëria (which has ceased broadcasting for some time and fired its whole staff of reporters) continues to have a national broadcasting license is another strike against KKRT. According to the law on radio and television, KKRT should have transferred this license to another station that meets the legal requirements on broadcasting and programming.

However, most of the panelists said that from the legal point of view there is no discrimination and there are no market entry barriers for independent media. "In order to start a newspaper, you only need a simple registration; there is no other obligation," said Musa Ulqini, opposition MP and member of the Parliamentary Media Commission.

#### 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.

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With regard to the tax regime, the panelists did not note any discrimination towards the media compared to other businesses. However, Genc Demiraj, owner of Amantia TV in the city of Vlora, said that the tax treatment of local media is not fair. "It is a well-accepted fact that media in Albania is not a profitable business. Nonetheless, it is taxed the same way as other profitable businesses. This puts media, especially the local ones, in a rather discriminated position and jeopardizes its survival," he said.

The local media representatives on the panel complained about the law on salaries. According to them, the fixed salary floors and social security payments for journalists well exceed what media outlets in small towns and rural areas can afford. They noted that this adds to the existing financial hardship of local media. Last year some panelists indicated that this law would help alleviate financial pressure on journalists and therefore they viewed it favorably. The law's down side is that in tough economic times, it eliminates one way that a media outlet can cut costs.

Criticism was more pronounced with regard to Indicator 4, crimes against journalists. In spite of the abovementioned promises of Prime Minister Berisha that no journalists would be punished by his administration, pressure on journalists and media criticizing the government has increased and comes in different forms. The panel denounced the cases of physical violence on journalists, such as the March 2008 assault on a journalist by SP MP Tom Doshi over the investigation of Doshi's academic credentials. Panelists noted that although assaults against the media are not perceived positively, public reaction against these cases remains muted.

Panelists also expressed alarm over cases of revenge dismissals of civil servants related to journalists who criticized the government. In Ilir Yzeiri's opinion, "The powers that be are attempting to increase the burden on journalists by exerting silent violence and sophisticated pressure." Remzi Lani, director of the Albanian Media Institute (AMI), said that

although there have been no cases of murdered journalists in Albania, the existence of different forms of violence on journalists renders their situation insecure.

The most spectacular case of abuse of power by the government against the media involved the daily newspaper *Tema*. This case led many panelists to decrease their score for this indicator. In the last months of 2008, the Berisha government started an open conflict with *Tema* and its publisher Mero Baze, due to the latter's denouncement of significant corruption involving members of Berisha's cabinet and his family members. According to articles published in *Tema* and other media, the corruption involved illegal ammunition trafficking and money laundering.

The reaction of the Berisha government was harsh. Minister of Economy Genc Ruli ordered its immediate eviction and an annulment of the 20-year lease that *Tema* had with the government for its printing facilities and newsroom. Although disguised as "state reasons," the order of minister Ruli was clearly perceived as political revenge. This became even more obvious when, although the newspaper won a court ruling against the government, police prevented journalists from reentering the newspaper premises. The journalists' associations, the UGSH, and international organizations such as Transparency International protested and demanded that the government cease its pressure on *Tema*, respect the court decision, and allow the normal work of journalists.

This event was evocative of the grave situations of 1997. At that time it was the same Berisha, then president, who instigated violence and pressure on media that criticized him. This reached its peak when journalists of *Koha Jonë* were imprisoned and its newsroom premises were torched.

With regard to the public broadcast media, Albanian Radio and Television (RTSH), panelists spoke almost unanimously of its continuous and absurd insistence on remaining unchanged since the fall of Communism. Each time a new party is elected to power, one of the first actions of the party is to change RTSH directing staff and replace persons loyal to the old government with persons loyal to the new government. "So, legally the television is public, while traditionally it has never been public," said Thanas Goga, media marketing analyst with A&R Advertising.

Although commercial broadcasting and newspapers have been established for years, politicians' attention to RTSH editorial policy has not diminished. According to the panelists, this is partially because RTSH continues to enjoy the widest signal coverage in the country, including remote areas where national commercial stations cannot penetrate. "Politicians are sensitive to RTSH because in a considerable portion of rural areas, newspapers do not reach the population, and

commercial stations have no interest in reaching them and do not invest in expanding their signal there," Ulqini said. "Hence, RTSH remains a quite important and influential propaganda tool for every government."

RTSH would have difficulty becoming independent from political parties and government, due to the heavy political pressure in place, according to panelist Lutfi Dervishi, a journalist and, until recently, director of news at RTSH. He was dismissed by order of ruling DP officials.

Such conditions prevent a public service media outlet from informing citizens on the issues that are not addressed by commercial media. For example, many commercial stations hesitate to broadcast investigative programs that expose corruption. Even when they show such programs, they are careful to not criticize businesses that buy their advertising time. A public service broadcaster should compensate for such shortcomings. Another unfortunate example took place in 2005, when the DP came to power and appointed new TVSH directors. One of their first actions was to cancel *Hapur*, the only investigative program that was broadcast for some years on TVSH, with the support of USAID.

Parliament has had multiple opportunities to pass proposed amendments to the penal code and civil code that would decriminalize libel and defamation. To some of the panelists, this is not a coincidence or error of omission. According to lawyer Genti Ibrahim, "It is time for us to lose our doubts of [the existence of] an intentional obstruction by the political class, because it has been years now that there has not been any progress on these proposals."

To Lani, criminal punishment for defamation and libel "constitutes a strong element of self-censorship" for journalists. This opinion was also supported by Ulqini: "The reasons that lead the Democrats to not approve the amendments to the penal code presently are the same that prevented the SP from passing the same amendments previously. Politicians of the past and present find it convenient to have the threat of punishment in the penal code as a pressure tool against the media."

No lawsuits were brought against journalists for defamation or libel in 2008. However, this is not a result of improved legislation—it is due to the public promise that Prime Minister Berisha made that no one from his administration would sue a journalist. Although this promise was welcome at first, now it is being increasingly perceived as an above-the-law solution rife with negative consequences.

"I would prefer the liberalization of the law in favor of free speech, coupled to the ethical standardization of free speech by the journalists' profession themselves, rather than a populist order of the prime minister. Even though on

first blush this order seems to protect the media, in fact it breaches the law and human rights," Yzeiri said.

The panelists noted that it is no coincidence that freedom of speech in Albania continues to suffer from abuse. "The concept of freedom of expression is different from the mess and anarchy resulting from a misuse of freedom of speech and a divorce of the truth and from facts," said Iliri Yzeiri, professor of journalism at the University of Elbasan. "The freedom of speech, unregulated by ethical norms that link it to the truth, degenerates into freedom of lies."

Panelists noted that in cases of libel and defamation against journalists, the burden of proof is placed on the plaintiff, although in past cases the reverse prevailed in practice. Administrative courts have left the issue of burden of proof to the judges. But when judges have had difficulties discovering the truth, and they have left the burden of proof to journalists. "All these cases are a perversion of the law, which supposes the opposite," Ibrahim said.

The panelists also complained about accessing public information. "Only the fact that a good law on access to public information is in place, but it is not implemented, prevents me from scoring this indicator a 0," Lani said. In general, the discussions revealed that although Albania has a law on access to public information, journalists encounter many obstacles from the government and are not allowed to access information that they are entitled to by law. According to Yzeiri, the chief obstacle is that the DP government continues to implement an executive order, issued years ago by SP ex-Prime Minister Fatos Nano, which mandates that information may only be released to the media via designated spokespersons. This order, criticized at the time as bordering on censorship and a way of centralizing the flow of information, continues to be implemented today by those politicians who, until recently, voiced those same criticisms as members of the opposition.

Yzeiri, who also contributes to the investigative, anti-corruption program *Hapur*, said that he is alarmed that some government decisions related to widely discussed scandals are not available at the website of the government. In his work as a reporter, he encounters a number of obstacles with the ministries—information that should be made available to journalists (and consequently to the public) is considered a state secret. "It is absurd to think that, [for example], the government is still keeping secret a decision on land prices for the compensation of ex-owners," Yzeiri said as an example.

Goga shared this point of view. "The opposition has just denounced the fact that a series of important decisions related to controversial affairs has not been published in the official gazette," he said.

The panelists gave positive scores related to the access of journalists and media outlets to international sources of information. Currently Albania has no limitation on accessing foreign news sources; they are accessible by almost all media. Even financial barriers to access are not an issue. Access is becoming easier due to the quick spreading of Internet service, which is no longer limited to Tirana and is available in most other Albanian cities. The panelists also deemed entrance into the journalism profession to be free, lacking any obstacles.

## OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

### Albania Objective Score: 2.22

Most indicator scores in this objective remained much the same as last year, although drops occurred in indicators 4 and 5 (coverage of key events and salaries of media professionals). This was offset by an increase in Indicator 1, fair and objective reporting.

On the surface it may not seem as though this indicator deserves an increased score (indeed, the overall objective score did remain nearly the same). But according to the panelists, professional knowledge of news reporting and ethical standards of journalism are on the increase; the issue is that politicians, economic lobbies, and media owners with political or economic interests interfere with editorial policy and hamper overall quality. Diminishing or stagnating journalism standards in Albania are no longer a consequence of ignorance, but rather an effect of various pressures and curtailed freedom.

Compared to the overall objective score, only a few indicator scores deviated noticeably. Indicators 3 and 5, self-censorship and salaries of media professionals, were a little more than a half point lower. Indicator 6, balance of entertainment and news programming, scored nearly a point higher.

It has been some years now since the code of ethics for journalists was drafted in Albania, and it meets all Western standards. However, its enforcement has been rarely observed. An Order of Journalists, established to implement the code of ethics, has done almost nothing to disseminate and impose these standards within the profession. The Order of Journalists has the power to hear cases of ethics violations; last year's panel reported that it had not heard a single case and that remains true this year as well. According to Lani, "[Albania] has drafted a code of ethics that is... violated, and we must admit that we do not have very ethical journalism." Lani said that implementation of the code and even the establishment of an Order of Journalists demands as

pre-conditions journalist associations and trade unions that are genuine and active—not just existing on paper—and that establish an environment for ethical standards in journalism. Panelists said also that professional ethical standards must be implemented in order to prevent punishment of journalists and media in court.

As noted above, the current government has vowed not to sue journalists or media outlets. Seemingly an act of tolerance, the prime minister's order has not contributed to improving the situation regarding ethical standards. In the absence of any legal action related to freedom of speech, there is no energetic self-regulatory response from the very institutions of the journalism community to implement the code of ethics. It is supposed that with the decriminalization of defamation and libel, abuse of free speech would become equally threatening and harmful to the right to freedom of speech without proper oversight of the self-regulating bodies. Ethical centers that serve to prevent abuse would be more effective with less severe, non-criminal punishment schemes in place.

There is no censorship in Albania, but self-censorship among members of the media is increasingly present. The fight of the political world against free speech is entering a new, more sophisticated age. Whether from political alignments, economic interests, or pressure from important advertisers, journalists and media minimize to the point of censorship various aspects of the news, or overstress what is in harmony with their interests. The pressure is so strong and progressively increasing that media that are independent and open to any news item or source are rapidly disappearing. "We can state that press in Albania is pluralistic, but not independent. Do we have any newspaper that once you read it, you no longer need to read the others? No, we have to

## 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).

buy three or four newspapers to be informed of an event in all its aspects," Lani said.

This conclusion was also supported by other panelists and applied to the broadcast media. "You have to watch at least three newscasts on different television stations to make sure you have received the full information on an event," Dervishi said.

The interference of mobile phone companies in the media serves as a good example of how large businesses exert influence on editorial policy. These companies have succeeded in blocking all critical coverage of them in both print and broadcast, in spite of the near-monopoly in its sector and various reports indicating that Albanians pay the highest mobile phone rates in Europe.

In 2008, as the June 2009 parliamentary elections got closer, political pressure on the media and television especially increased visibly. Part of this pressure came from the leadership of SP, the largest opposition party. Even stations that until recently had a reputation of being independent positioned themselves to more visibly favor one political force or the other. News 24 television, perceived for many years as independent, became closer to SP, to the point of censoring even other opposition parties or civic movements that engaged in actions or expressed opinions that were not agreeable to the SP leadership.

Political pressure manifests not only in the way news is reported, but in political debate programs, which continue to be among the most watched broadcasts in the country. Many of the moderators of these programs or the hosting media outlet have started to select or avoid those whose opinions do not fit with the party or leader who influences the station's editorial policies, and even the program moderator directly. This self-censorship is currently one of the most dangerous phenomena to media freedom in Albania. It is a silent and non-confrontational threat, disguised as the freedom and right of program directors to choose whom to invite to their programs. Being a self-applied censorship, it is more difficult for the public to detect and the profession at large to fight.

Other reasons are behind self-censorship by reporters and even columnists, commentators, and editors. Journalists that maintain independence and criticize the government and powerful people or expose their misdeeds are risking their jobs and those of their relatives employed in the public sector. Last year, the UGSH lodged protests over several cases where family members of well-known journalists who criticized the government were fired from government jobs. These acts clearly constituted political vengeance against the journalists over their opinions.

*Iris Luarasi, professor in the Journalism Faculty at the University of Tirana, discussed the [salary] situation outside Tirana. "Salaries of journalists in the districts are absolutely scandalous and do not exceed €200 per month," she said.*

In the context of a poor country such as Albania, where salaries are low and unemployment is high, the threat of unemployment remains an effective pressure tool for the government against free speech and media. "In the context where independent media have almost ceased to exist, the fact that the space for independent journalists and commentators on TV screens and newspaper pages has narrowed significantly is a disturbing one," Çipa said.

Cooperation with the government leads to a series of privileges for editors and journalists, starting with coveted jobs for their family members to lucrative tenders and different investments with public funds. These privileges are among the strongest government weapons for corrupting and controlling a part of the commercial media. According to Çipa, "Conversations among the community of journalists indicate that there are professional journalists that receive payments or gifts in exchange of some articles made by order." The other panelists did not disagree with this assessment.

Panelists also noted an increasing tendency to act as "parasites" when plying the journalism trade. Reporters in general are content to cover press conferences and relay press releases of political parties or associations and fail to further investigate the issues. "In the case of an explosion similar to that of Gërdec, which destroyed several villages and killed 26 persons, it is impossible for the event and the ensuing statements of the government and political parties on the tragedy to not be covered in the media," Dervishi said. "However, investigation into the causes of the event, beyond the political statements, is almost absent." This phenomenon is present in other problems, such as the debate on the fuel market monopoly or corruption in privatization.

Even though media in Albania are not prevented from covering events related to national or international security, covering certain issues can bring negative repercussions to the media outlet or journalists. The panelists referred to the example of the *Tema* newspaper, which was persecuted by the government and finally besieged by the police, precisely for daring to inform the public on allegations of corruption.



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With a few special exceptions, journalism in Albania does not rank among those professions that guarantee a sufficient and secure income. What can be called a polarization of salaries is present in Albanian media. The salaries of journalists are higher in Tirana but extremely low in other cities. Similarly, there is a large gap between salaries of reporters and those of directors, both in newspapers and in television programs. "There are some newspaper or TV directors that receive from €2,000 to €5,000 per month, while reporters in Tirana are paid from €400 to €600 per month," said Andi Tela, currently editor-in-chief of the largest newspaper in the country, *Panorama*.

This has been the level of salaries for some time now. However, against the current backdrop of rising prices and economic crisis, the real value of salaries is even lower. Meanwhile, the tendency of newspaper, radio, and television owners to lower costs continues, and some have resorted to hiring journalism students and paying them even less.

Iris Luarasi, professor in the Journalism Faculty at the University of Tirana, discussed the situation outside Tirana. "Salaries of journalists in the districts are absolutely scandalous and do not exceed €200 per month," she said. According to Luarasi, this is one of the reasons many journalism students major in a second degree as well. In sum, they do not think of journalism as their lifelong profession. Dervishi further confirmed this finding, noting, "People that started in journalism in 1991 right after the fall of Communism and are still in the profession can be counted with fingers of both hands." Many journalists entered politics, public administration, or other professions—a tendency that continues to this day.

In general, the panelists gave high marks to the role of the news editions in media programming and their ratio

to entertainment programs. They even emphasized that not only are news and news-related programs not eclipsed by entertainment, the opposite is true. According to Genc Ymeraj, the problem of Albanian media is precisely the absence of movies and the excess of news or political debates.

With regard to the equipment and premises for news gathering and production, panelists stated that the situation is the same as a year ago: a wide gap between capital-based media and district media is still visible. While Tirana has commercial media of excellent technological quality (such as Top Channel or Vizion+, which have invested in terrestrial and satellite digital platform, as well as in high definition), stations in the districts are usually located in sub-par premises and still make use of VHS technology. With regard to print media, the difference is also evident in the capital. (Local print media failed many years ago.) There are several well-equipped print media, such as *Shqip*, *Panorama*, and *Shekulli*, while other newspapers have very poor equipment and technology.

The panel expressed the concern that investigative reporting is not developing properly. There are only two investigative programs: *Hapur*, supported by the United Nations Democracy Fund (UNDEF) and broadcast in 15 local stations; and *Fix Fare* by Top Channel. However, many other media are not developing this kind of reporting at all. According to Luarasi, the problem is that investigation demands time and expenses at a time when many stations tend to burden journalists with preparing a couple of routine daily news stories and cannot invest in more in-depth or long-term investigations.

The lack of variety and creativity in news, along with overcrowding of broadcasting with press conferences of politicians and bureaucrats, is an increasingly pervasive phenomenon in Albanian media today. In this case, poverty and parasitism feed on each other and render misuse of media by the politicians even easier.

### OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

#### Albania Objective Score: 2.26

Panelists' ratings of plurality of news showed little change between this year and last. The overall objective score slipped slightly from 2.32 to 2.26. As with last year, indicators 3 and 4 (objectivity of state media and news agencies) fared the worst of all indicators, with scores roughly a point lower than the average. Indicator 5, independent broadcasters produce their own news programming, received the highest score, almost a point above the objective score, and also showed a significant increase from last year.

The panelists observed the persistence of difficulty disseminating newspapers in rural areas, which account for almost half of the population despite continued population movements. No solution has been found to address this phenomenon, which has in fact artificially narrowed the market for print media. There are a variety of newspapers, but they are produced only in the capital of the country. In addition, the level of poverty among the majority of the population has reduced the size of printed editions, and revenues from advertisements are insufficient. Hence, the situation of printed press in Albania is entering a critical phase. The picture becomes clearer by looking at the example of the retired segment of the population that receives a monthly pension of €80 to €120 and is not willing to spend €40 each day on a newspaper. This is the minimal selling price, and it comes close to the printing cost for a newspaper.

Albania's electronic media covers most of the territory and population. "In the most remote areas or places where newspapers are out of reach, one can find satellite antennas and digital platforms," said Dervishi. Even in this case, that part of the population that lives in the capital or urban areas has easier access to this type of media. The panel noticed that poverty does affect access to electronic media. "True, there is a variety of news sources but the level of income of many Albanians means they can not afford to purchase a digital platform," Luarasi said.

Cipa also mentioned the expanding use of the Internet as a source of information as a positive indicator. "The majority of second-tier municipalities and communes [Albania's smallest jurisdictional unit] have developed their own websites, while the number of private pages and blogs is increasing," he said.

The panel concluded that, aside from financial limitations, access to local and international media is free and the government has not shown any tendency to control this information. Albanians view the purchase of foreign newspapers as difficult due to their low income and high price of imported print media. "*Corriere della Sera* is more expensive in Albania than in Austria," Tela said. This statement was affirmed also by Remzi Lani, who said that *The Economist* is more expensive in Tirana than in Madrid.

Panelists did not rate state media very well. They affirmed that no significant improvements have been made in materializing the true mission of public media. RTSH continues to be under the influence of the government and not attuned to public interests. Today, the director of RTSH's newsroom is the same journalist who some time ago served as the editor of the newspaper of the DP. Although unlike the first years of transition, today one can see leaders of the opposition or other segments of the opposition on

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RTSH, reporting is obviously biased (in quantity, as well as in quality) in favor of the government and its party.

For Dervishi, the lack of political balance is not the greatest concern regarding the activity of public media. "The problem is that every night we watch in the public media many politicians who are decreasingly enjoying the sympathy of the public, and we watch fewer problems that are indeed worrisome for the public," he said.

Ilir Yzeiri felt that it is exactly the dependency of public television on the executive branch that has forced RTSH to cancel programs on anti-corruption, which are of particular value for public information. His case in point was the program *Open*.

Presently, only foreign news agencies such as Reuters and AFP are used as information sources in Albania. Very few public or private news agencies exist, and they are of no interest to local media. "With the exception of foreign news agencies, there is no private or public agency that sells news," Tela said. He added that journalists produce news that they publish in

#### 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.

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the newspaper. According to Ymeraj, it is not the public news agency (ATSH) that feeds private media with news, but the other way around.

Commercial media produce their own news and sometimes provide programming for public news agencies. Commercial media differ on the degree of political influence exerted upon them. Hence, public media tries to limit the profile of news that is unfavorable to the government, although the same news may appear with a higher profile in many commercial media.

Panelists observed that the issue of transparency in media ownership remains a problem. According to Ulqini, transparency is required by law, but the law in itself has its pitfalls and transparency cannot be obtained in these circumstances. “Through the years, all the reports written about Albania try to stress progress in the area of making the media ownership as transparent as possible, from an institutional point of view as well as a legal one,” he said.

For Lani, the problem does not lie with the lack of transparency regarding ownership, but with identifying the real sources of financing. The latter can be camouflaged in all possible ways. The panel emphasized that the media landscape is moving towards establishment of certain dominant media groups. Also, they pointed out that there are few foreign investments in media, likely because the level of poverty and the relative infancy of Albanian media. The market for newspapers is especially troublesome. One testimony is the fact that a German investor with a considerable penetration in the Balkans has entered the local market by purchasing a television station, but not a newspaper.

With regard to the development of minority media, the panelists agreed with Ulqini, who said, “From the legal angle, minorities have no obstacles in starting a local newspaper, radio, or television.” But they noted that legal freedom is not accompanied by the necessary financing. To Lani, one

shortcoming of the Albanian state is that it does not allocate any financial support to minority media—a phenomenon that is present in neighboring countries as well.

In the south, where the Greek minority is concentrated, many newspapers and radio stations are available from Greece. There is no Greek-language Albanian television, due to lack of minority finances. But the panelists noted that television stations broadcasting in Greece are normally watched in the area and make up for the lack of domestic television. The Roma minority has newspapers, magazines, and other publications; and the Macedonian community has radio stations. National public radio airs programs in some languages of minorities from its branches in Kukes, Korce, and Gjirokaster.

#### **OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT**

#### **Albania Objective Score: 1.87**

Although panelists’ assessments of this objective are slightly higher from last year, the situation was not depicted very optimistically. A few indicators received noticeably higher scores, such as Indicators 1 and 6; however, Indicator 5, government subsidies for commercial media, scored much worse than last year due to the use of government advertising to reward friendly media outlets and punish critical ones. Only one indicator did not score relatively close to the overall score: Indicator 3, advertising agencies, which improved from last year and scored more than a half point greater than the objective score.

#### **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.

With very few exceptions, private media are not profitable enterprises. Even the large television broadcasters holding national licenses are having a hard time breaking even. This is related less to management issues and more to the advertising market. Although advertising is still the main financing source for both print and electronic media, it is still relatively small (€21 million per year) for a country like Albania, with its plethora of newspapers, radios, and television stations. The poor advertising market allows powerful advertising clients to assume power over editorial policies, threatening withdrawal of advertising if the media dare to criticize their businesses. The most blatant of many examples is mobile phone companies, which for several years in a row blocked the publication of criticism of the high, monopolistic prices they charge.

According to the panelists, the number of newspapers (significantly higher than what a normal supply-and-demand market would support) with a relatively low circulation is not an indication of abundance in Albania, but rather of poverty and of the sinister relationship between the businesses sponsoring the media and political parties. Panelists said that many newspapers were established by businesses as blackmail tools against politicians and government, and to trade advantage in public tenders and other lucrative privileges in exchange for support from their media or silence about corruption.

Because of these challenging circumstances, Lani said, "Most of the media entities do not operate as separate enterprises, but rather as extensions of the businesses that support them."

The more serious newspapers have made an attempt to find different solutions to the problem. In order to reduce losses, some of them have instituted higher prices at the cost of having fewer buyers and fewer editions. They have survived only through subsidies from the owners and drastically reducing salaries or the number of employees. Some newspapers have tried to lower prices, but this strategy has not increased the number of buyers, and instead revenues from sales have dropped. The initiative reported by the MSI study last year that would have established a price floor for newspapers died without results. The panel concluded that printed press (under heavy competition from electronic media) is facing the same challenge that some years ago afflicted the local press, which is now almost defunct.

With regard to public media, many years have passed since they were charged with misuse of public funds. However, a transparent system of accounting, which would put an end to all charges and financial fog around these media, has yet to be established.

*Because of these challenging circumstances, Lani said, "Most of the media entities do not operate as separate enterprises, but rather as extensions of the businesses that support them."*

The circulation of newspapers is progressively lower, while subscriptions account for a small portion of the revenue. The panel concluded that media does not receive sufficient income from sustainable financial sources and this financial fragility lies at the root of many other vulnerabilities and poor professional standards.

Recent years have witnessed an increase in the number of advertising agencies, which many clients use to conduct their advertising campaigns. The problem that was noted in the panel discussion is that agencies are focused mainly in the capital and in some other large cities, neglecting other areas in the country, where many other local media operate. According to Luftim Vani, owner of a local television station, "This is one of the reasons that local media outside Tirana suffer an absence of advertising revenue even more."

The advertising market is also compromised by the lack of market research in Albania. "We are the only country [in Europe] without audience research, and until now the advertising contracts are just estimations or even made on a clientelist basis," Dervishi said.

The main media outlets try to carry out research regarding audience preferences and to adapt their programming to these preferences. However, these are still in experimental stages. Even at this level, the efficiency of these efforts is obstructed by poorly estimated audience measurements and less-than-reliable circulation figures. For almost 20 years, media owners have been the only source for circulation and audience research, and data inflation is evident. The panelists expressed their criticism that Albania currently has no law that forces newspapers to publish their daily circulation in each issue, as is the case in many other countries. Ulqini explained that the very owners of newspapers have lobbied in the Parliament for this not to take place.

The Albanian government does not subsidize the media directly; however, the government places advertisements and notifications in commercial media. These constitute a considerable source of income in a modest advertising market. These government advertisements have become an apple of discord and a source of mutual charges for years now. The panelist discussed that the government has

*“The interest of media operators in training their journalists is almost zero, and that is why trainings are carried out entirely through foreign financing.” Lani, AMI’s director, said.*

broadcast more spots on public television and TV Klan, which are media with close government ties; less in Top Channel television, the largest and most modern commercial station in Albania; and none at all on other stations that have appeared to be more critical towards government.

Top Channel has rented its public premises for several years from the previous SP government, which the station supported. After the station took a critical stance vis-à-vis the current DP government, the government requested that Top Channel leave its premises. This is an issue that has dragged on for years, but it is expected to explode soon, as several other private stations also rent from the government. All these developments were concisely summarized by one of the panelists as “the boomerang of clientelism.”

To Yzeiri, the weak financial situation of the media is problematic and the government must follow the example of Italy or France and contribute to subsidizing the media. However, this opinion was debated by several panel participants. “I do not think that government must pay for the media, as such a thing would turn into a government tool for controlling the media,” Lani said. As long as Albania continues to be Europe’s poorest country, it seems that Albanian media will continue to languish and suffer from all the negative consequences of poverty on the standards of the profession.

## OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

### Albania Objective Score: 2.28

This objective scored almost identically as last year. Minor increases in Indicators 2 and 5 (professional associations and professional training) were offset by lower scores in Indicators 1 and 7 (trade associations and media distribution). Indicator 1 was the only indicator to not score close to the overall objective score, coming up short by more than a point.

The UGSH, a trade union financially supported by UNDEF, now has 400 reporters as members and has established branches in different cities in the country. UGSH has been even more active this year, with protests and press conferences aimed at protecting journalists’ rights in cases of violence and of different pressures exerted by the authorities.

UGSH is working with authorities and media owners to negotiate contracts for journalists, who, for the most part, work without any contracts. This is a situation that leads to journalists having no protection and no rights vis-à-vis the owners, frequently leading to poor professional standards. Media owners find it easy to sack a journalist that writes material that is not agreeable to them, when the relationship is not formalized in a contract.

UGSH forcefully protested against the failure of TV Arberia’s owners to meet its financial obligations to journalists when it was liquidated. UGSH also protested against the authorities firing family members of some well-known commentators who are rather critical of the government. UGSH is the first organization that has distributed membership cards and has succeeded in collecting membership fees among the journalists’ community. In addition, UGSH has offered legal assistance to those journalists that have been forced to face trials, and was very active in the *Tema* case.

The panelists stated that Albania’s three other journalist organizations, established years ago, are still passive. Journalists do not enjoy any support from these almost phantom organizations, and the organizations themselves are unable to effectively pressure or lobby the government for improvement of journalists’ working conditions or for amendment of legislation that regulates the media environment.

Associations of publishers and media owners have been active in protecting their narrow interests in rare cases where they feel the need. In the past they have lobbied parliament and the government regarding media legislation, such as with the law on digital broadcasting. These organizations essentially disappear once the matter they are addressing is resolved; in 2008, they were completely inactive.

## 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.

Several NGOs, such as the Albanian Helsinki Committee, cooperate with the media in protecting freedoms. Other NGOs, including the Institute for Public and Legal Studies, have contributed significantly also with amending media legislation. It must be said that when being taken to task for press freedom violations, Albanian politicians fear the reactions of “internationals” more than NGOs of domestic public opinion (except for the Albanian Helsinki Committee and UGSH).

The panelists were not enthusiastic about the work done in the journalism departments of universities. Yzeiri, a journalism professor at the University of Elbasan, stated that students are doing more poorly and that there is now less effort to improve journalism education. He noted that attempts to create a radio and television studio for students to practice with have failed. “Even the opportunities for further training abroad for journalists are almost nonexistent,” he said.

The panelists were more positive regarding short-term journalist trainings organized by AMI. These courses are realized with the support of foreign and international organizations and address a broad spectrum of topics related to the profession, including news reporting and editing, photography, media management, journalism ethics, EU integration problems, etc. The journalists participating in the courses are not required to pay. However, the reduced staff in newsrooms and the pressure of everyday work make it increasingly difficult for journalists to attend the courses. Furthermore, according to Dervishi, “The interest of media operators in training their journalists is almost zero, and that is why trainings are carried out entirely through foreign financing.” Lani, AMI’s director, agreed with this sentiment.

Albania has a significant number of private printing houses upon which newspapers may rely, and the government imposes no limitations on printing. There are no local manufacturers of newsprint, but there are several importers. To date, supplies of newsprint have not been used as a tool of political pressure.

With regard to the distribution of newspapers, Albania is the only country in Europe lacking a system of newsstands. Newspapers are sold on the street, which becomes problematic in rainy weather. Some newspapers use their own trucks and others use distribution agencies to deliver to sellers. Newspapers do not reach the villages at all, and this has artificially and dangerously limited the newspaper market in the country.

Broadcasters own their own transmitters; however, the government has been known to shut down those belonging to critical media, usually charging that the station is operating in violation of the terms of its license.

## List of Panel Participants

**Lutfi Dervishi**, freelance journalist, Tirana

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

**Luftim Vani**, station owner, Mati TV, Mati

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

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

**Gent Ibrahim**, lawyer, Institute of Law Studies, Tirana

**Genc Ymeraj**, editor, News 24 TV, Tirana

**Genci Demiraj**, owner, Amantia TV, Vlora

**Aleksander Cipa**, head, Union of Albanian Journalists, Tirana

**Thanas Goga**, marketing analyst, A&R Advertising Company, Tirana

**Illir Yzeiri**, professor of journalism, University of Elbasan, Elbasan

**Fatos Baxhaku**, freelance analyst and journalist, Tirana

**Prece Zogaj**, member, Parliamentary Commission on Mass Media, Tirana

**Alfred Peza**, editor-in-chief, Ora News TV, Tirana

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

## Moderator and Author

**Andrea Stefani**, senior media advisor, IREX/Albania, Tirana

**Assistant: Sokol Lilo**, program assistant, IREX/Albania, Tirana

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