



CORRUPTION AND THE MEDIA

Monitoring daily newspapers on coverage of corruption

(February 2009)

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Corruption and the media

Corruption is like a disease, infecting a country when it is weak. Left to run unchecked, this disease can spread and grow in the country's vital organs – its institutions – sickening the rest of the body until it is crippled. The media plays a vital role in keeping corruption in check. It can play a key role in treating a country afflicted with corruption. Often referred to as the Fourth Estate – after the government, the lawmakers and the judiciary – the media is a vital link between a country's authorities and its people and an important check on power.

The media is critical to the investigation and exposure of corruption. The role of the media is critical in promoting good governance and controlling corruption. It not only raises public awareness about corruption, its causes, consequences and possible remedies but also investigates and reports incidences of corruption. The effectiveness of the media, in turn, depends on access to information and freedom of expression, as well as a professional and ethical cadre of investigative journalists.

The following sections focus precisely on the definition of corruptions and ensuing problems, the role of the media in exposing corruption to the public, and practical cases on how this important duty is handled in Albanian mainstream media.

1. Definition of corruption, causes, and consequences

Corruption constitutes one of the largest challenges of our time, a challenge that can and should be faced. We are aware that corruption, large or small, is a threat to democratic institutions and fundamental human rights and freedoms on one hand, and hinders, mines, and deepens poverty in the country, on the other hand.

Simply defined, corruption is abuse of entrusted power for personal benefits. According to *Jeremy Pope*, Executive Director of Office of Transparency International in London, corruption includes acts of public sector officials, be it politicians or civil workers, which, unfairly and illegally, increase benefits of these officials or others close to them, doing so an abuse of entrusted power.

On a broader meaning, corruption does not represent only abuse of official post from public employees; it also includes all persons that abuse with their post whenever there is a chance to benefit in easy ways. Hence, corruption is not just use of political power for personal benefits. It is more than secret cooperation of public employees with business persons for benefiting illegally.

According to Gerland E. Caiden, the most widespread corruption forms are the following:

- Illegal transactions, smuggling;
- Kleptocracy, fraud, privatisation of public funds
- Abuse, forgery and fraud;
- Abusing with post, maltreatment, torture, undeserved pardon, etc;

- Misuse of justice, criminal activities, false evidence, illegal arrests, slander;
- Failure to carry out duties, negligence, parasitism;
- Bribes and gifts, forceful obligation, illegal taxes;
- Corrupted elections, stolen votes;
- Abuse with confidential knowledge and information, falsification of materials;
- Unauthorized sale of public offices, properties, and licenses;
- Manipulation of rules, goods, and materials, contracts, and loans;
- Tax evasion;
- Links to organized crime, relations to black market;
- Illegal surveillance, abuse with telecommunication and mail;
- Abuse with official seals, real estate, and privileges.

Which are the factors that lead to corruption?

An obvious factor would be poverty as the main source. There would be no corruption without poverty. However, poverty is only one of the causes; otherwise it is impossible to explain the involvement of rich countries in corruptive affairs. For example, persons manipulating banking systems are not necessarily affected by poverty. Hence, corruption is a two-way channel: it can emerge from poverty, but it can also derive from greed for riches. The individuals involved in corruptive affairs, which have a devastating impact on the country's development, are usually a small group and their activities usually are not visible to citizens. However, petty corruption is pervasive; citizens encounter it in every step and its roots lie in poverty. Insufficient salaries for public employees are considered a factor that contributes to corruption. Clearly, solution to this problem is much more complex than a simple raise.

The consequences from consolidation of corruptive affairs and especially their transformation into a system, can lead to the failure of good will to react against this phenomenon. This can happen, for example, due to power concentration at the top. A head of state can try to face this challenge, but he is hindered by the existing corrupted government apparatus. On the other hand, political and administrative figures at high ranks may wish to make effective changes, but they may be hindered or limited by the absence of engagement at leadership levels.

Reforms against corruption, which lack a specific and achievable objective do not lead to a tangible change, but are rather in the framework of demagoguery. When reforms are not coordinated, they are ineffective. Lack of functioning of the legal system leads to the problem that also corrupts the justice system (delays, insecurity, corruption). If existing laws are not implemented, there is little probability that the new laws will have any effect and that institutional mechanisms will work.

As a conclusion, it would be fair to say that corruption affects democratic development of a society, threatening the work of public institutions and the optimal use of resources. Corruption destroys the development and quality of living within a society. It fosters wrong choices, encourages competition to bribe, instead of competition in quality and

services; it hinders the development of a normal market and distorts the economic and social development of a country.

2. The role of the media in the war against corruption

In Albania, the role of the media in exposing corruptive cases and affairs has increased. This is related to the increasing number of media outlets in the country, improvement of the level of professionalization of journalists, and establishment of legal basis that enable journalists to access public information, although the practice is not always encouraging.

The current government explicitly stated that wanted to start a new era of cooperation in the war against corruption in the first months it came to power. The government also vowed to cooperate with the media and civil society in fighting corruption and increasing transparency. The Prime Minister prevented the high officials and public administration to take journalists to court for defamation. Although this was a controversial measure, it was a sign of political will to allow media to do its job, especially in investigating governance.

However, there are many aspects to improve in the relations between state institutions and the media. There is still a significant lack of transparency in state institutions regarding the release of public information to journalists and the public. The situation is even more difficult in local government institutions, where the law on access to information of official documents is poorly implemented.

Free media is ranked among independent court system as two twin powers that are not supposed to respond to politicians. Both of these powers are supposed to serve as powerful counterweights to corruption in public life. Unlike the judges and prosecutors, media is not appointed or confirmed by politicians. In a democratic society, media is supposed to be free of political patronage.

In this ideal setting, the media is supposed to serve as one of the most efficient tools in exposing and fighting corruption. Some of its duties in this realm would be the following:

- prevents and denounces the phenomenon of the corruption, referring to specific cases;
- achieves transparency on procedures and mechanisms that yield profit and privileges as a result of abusing and stealing public funds;
- cooperates with civil society or specialized public bodies in order to show the level of spread of corruption;
- renders public for all the legislation that prevents and punishes corruption, along with citizens' rights in this context.

The exposure of corruption in the media is achieved by investigating and rendering public specific corruptive affairs and informing the public on data and conclusions produced by public institutions or non-government organizations, as well as from independent sources, domestic or international.

3. Mainstream media coverage of corruption issues

Introduction

The topic of corruption is one of the pervasive topics of the political and media debate in Albania. The fact that the Albanian press deals at length with corruption testifies to the fact that corruption is one of the gravest problems in Albanian society. Media has a very important role both in discovering corruption affairs through investigative journalism, and also in shaping public perceptions on this phenomenon. However, the media role can be both a positive and a negative one. The rendering banal of this phenomenon (everybody is accused as corrupted, which in a way renders the concept of evil a relative one), instead of increasing public awareness on corruption, downplays it. On the other hand, the anti-corruption platforms can serve as populism platforms, which is one of the ills of the new democracies. The public debate and the anti-corruption rhetoric draw attention away from the debate on reforms.

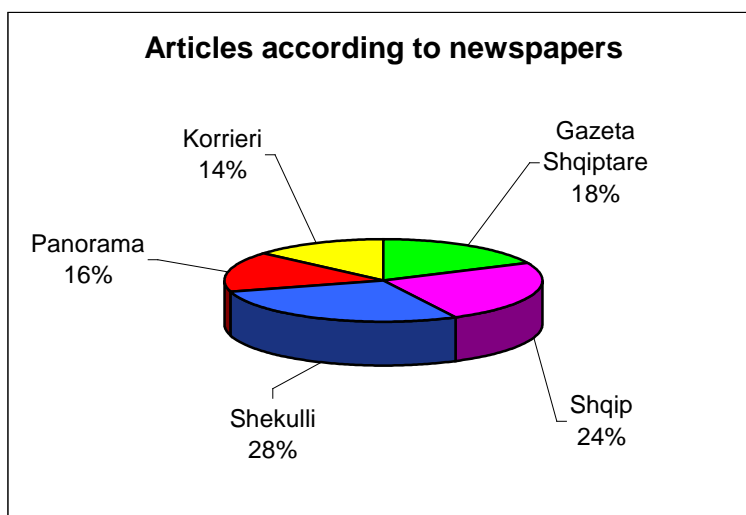
What is the fate of this phenomenon in the Albanian press? Which are the main trends in Reporting Corruption? What are the achievements and which problems still linger? In this light, the monitoring of Albanian press on this topic will deal with questions such as the main topics related to corruption, analyzing sources of information used, topics addressed, media conduct and vested interests, use of investigative methods, analysis of the phenomena, follow-up reports, etc.

Methodology

In order to have a better understanding of the way media covers corruption issues, a monitoring report of the main five daily newspapers was carried out for the month of February 2009. The daily newspapers were from mainstream media and the ones considered having the largest number of sales. Since there are no official data on the sales of newspapers and their overall circulation, the selection of newspapers to monitor was made on the basis of private consulting with the editors-in-chief of the daily publications. The daily publications included in the monitoring report were: *Shekulli*, *Panorama*, *Gazeta Shqiptare*, *Korrieri*, and *Shqip*. During this time all the articles related to corruptive affairs were monitored in terms of quantity and space devoted to the topic, ethical aspects, quality of information presented in the framework of public interest, etc. The following is a more detailed analysis of the main trends noticed in the course of the monitoring.

Quantitative analysis

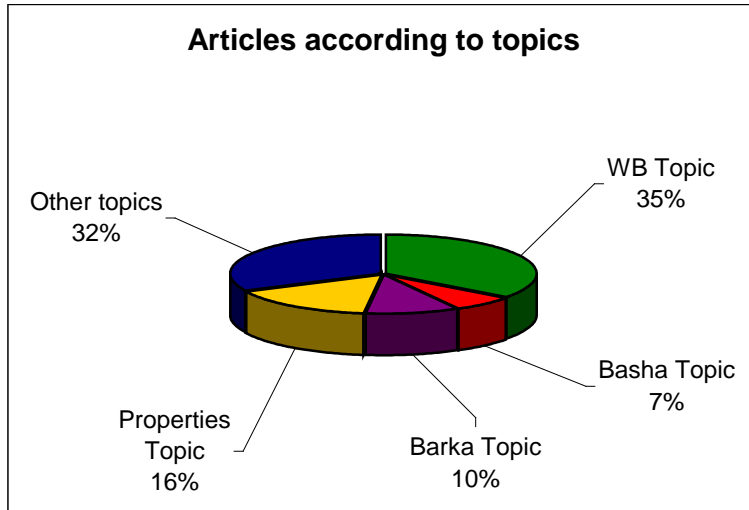
The analysis of the monitored articles was both quantitative and qualitative. The total number of articles monitored was 160 articles for all five newspapers. Articles monitored did not include only news stories, but also editorials, features, brief news, etc. The articles' length varied from two paragraphs to two tabloid pages, depending on the news. The following chart represents the division of articles in percentages for each newspaper according to the monitoring:



There were four main alleged corruptive affairs that were reported during this month the newspapers were monitored: one including a current minister, one an ex-minister, one a project of World Bank, and another one related to falsification of properties. Based on the topics encountered during the monitoring, the following table represents the number of articles each newspaper has devoted to each topic identified during the monitoring:

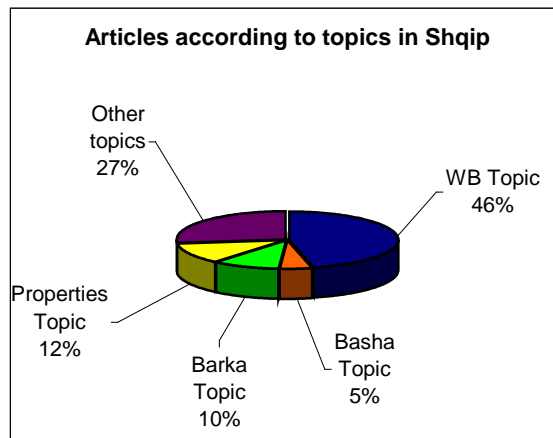
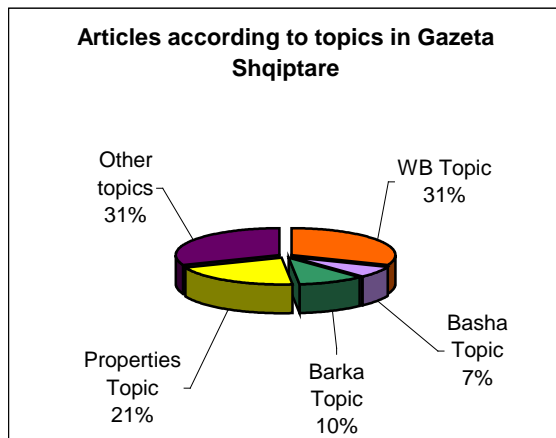
Newspapers	Total number of articles	WB affair	Basha affair	Barka affair	Properties' affair	Other topics
Gazeta Shqiptare	29	9	2	3	6	9
Shqip	39	19	2	4	5	11
Shekulli	45	13	2	5	5	22
Panorama	25	6	3	2	7	7
Korrieri	22	11	2	2	3	4
Total	160	58	11	16	26	53

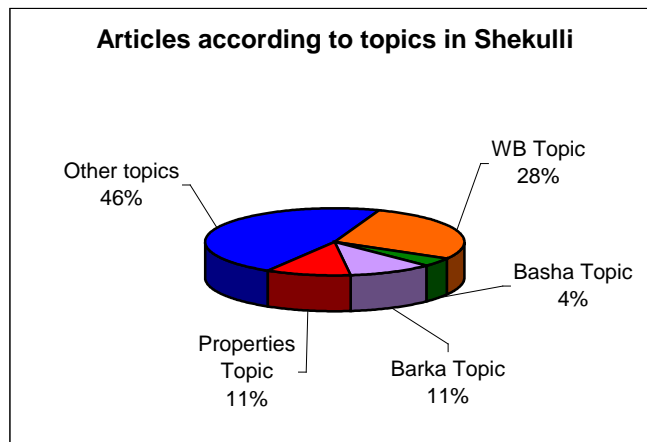
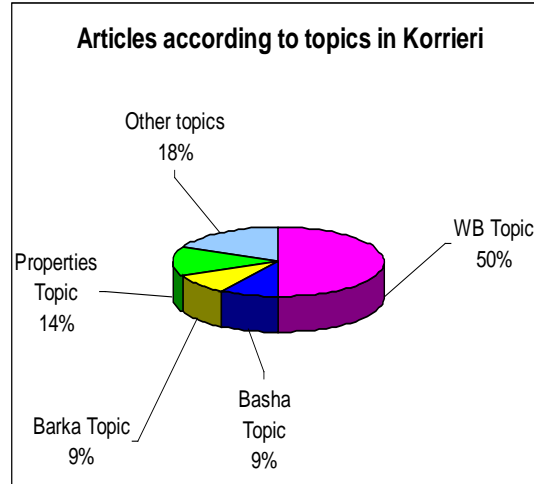
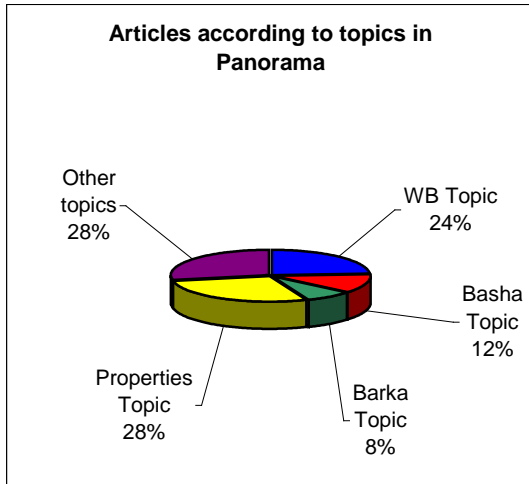
The same data is represented in percentages divided by each topic for the whole monitoring period, in all newspapers:



As it can be seen, the topic that was most widely covered during this period has been that of World Bank project affair. The topic of falsification and manipulation of real estate follows with 16% of the articles, along with ex-minister Barka's affair with 10% and minister Basha's affair with 7%. A significant percentage of articles, 32%, are devoted to other topics related to corruption, which cannot be grouped in particular categories. They usually are related to coverage of petty corruptive affairs.

The following graphs depict the division of topics for each newspaper during the period monitored in percentages. This would enable a more detailed picture of the coverage of each topic by every newspaper, along with the possibility of comparing and contrasting among them.





As it can be seen, the division of percentages in each newspaper for each topic reflects to a certain extent the overall division of total articles monitored, with slight changes from one newspaper to the next. The changes in percentages are also related to the priorities that each newsroom assigns to specific events, as well as influenced by the ability of the newsroom to cover certain events, especially the one in the districts. In addition, in terms of layout and space, the way a newspaper covers an event is different from the way another one covers it: one may carry side-bars, boxes with figures, separate statements, etc, and these are counted as separate articles, albeit on the same topic, as compared to another newspaper, which dedicates one long article to the event or topic in question. In general, it can be said that when looking at the topic and events covered, there is a certain uniformity in the selection of topics covered in the newspapers.

Qualitative analysis

In order to analyze the coverage of corruption in mainstream print media and identify the main trends in this regard, the monitoring analyzed each major affair reported on during February. For this purpose, analyzing coverage of the three main corruptive affairs covered, alleged or true, would provide a more detailed and complete overview of the main trends in reporting corruption. Furthermore, analyzing coverage of this topic on a case by case basis, would also enable spotting inconsistencies among the newspapers, factual errors, and different ways of covering the same events.

⇒ *Barka affair*

This case is related to the start of investigations by prosecution office in Berat in relation to allegations that ex-Minister of Labour Kosta Barka was involved in a corruptive affair. According to the articles, this Ministry was in charge of administering and granting funds to a shelter aimed at assisting children who were isolated for bloodfeud reasons. However, part of the money never made it to the center, and the director of the center denounced this affair.

What has to be said right away regarding this case is that reading all the articles in all the newspaper, it is confusing to understand who is the main suspect or even if there is a suspect. Although most newspapers hurry to point at the ex-high official in this corruptive case, the content of the articles does not always support this claim. Better said, Barka is a person under investigation in one article, a person being questioned in the framework of investigations in another, and even forcefully taken to the police in yet another article.

So, one of the articles starts this way: “Berat Prosecution starts to investigate ex-Minister of Labour and Social Affairs, Kosta Barka, for financial abuses.”¹ The most extreme information comes from another article, which ends like this: “The ex-Minister showed up at the prosecution office after the latter signed the order to forcefully take him there.”² Clearly, there is something wrong here, as there are inconsistencies in reporting across the newspapers.

The status of Barka in this overall alleged corruptive affair becomes even more confused after he issues a statement, reacting to the newspaper reports that relate him to the investigation. One such article, focusing on the statement he made, states: “Kosta Barka says he is not involved in the investigations related to the scandal of the Centre for Isolated Children in Polican... ‘I want to clarify from the beginning that Kosta Barka has not been and is not under investigation for any affair related to abuse with my duty.’”³ So, not only were newspapers inconsistent regarding Barka’s status; they were all wrong according to Barka, because he had only provided information to the prosecutoin and there was no other legal status involved. Clearly, the reporting is confused and

¹ “Barka, nen hetim per fondet e femijeve te ngujuar,” Shekulli, 03.02.2009, f.3.

² “Barka 4 ore ne prokurori, fajin ia delegon vartesve,” Panorama, 25.02.2009, f.8.

³ “Barka: nuk jam nen hetim, se nuk kam administruar fonde,” Shqip, 05.02. 2009, f.22.

misleading in this case. In some cases Barka is reported to be a suspect, in some a person under investigation, in some forcefully taken to the prosecutor, and in another he volunteered to go to the prosecutor. The only thing that can be said in the defense of the newspapers here is that they all published Barka's statement, which he explicitly said that was issued in order to clarify the public opinion on this matter, something the newspapers were clearly failing to do.

Something else that draws the eye in this affair is also the inconsistency with figures that allegedly were abused or gone missing. They change from one newspaper to the next and sometimes even in different dates of the same newspaper. So, one of the newspapers reports that Barka is under investigation for the sum of 150,000 Euro. Further on, it turns out that the Ministry provided first 100,000 Euro and then two funds of respectively 3.2 and 2.2 million leks.⁴ So, if the minister is investigated only for the last two funds, as the paper claims, why is the reader led to believe even in the title that the alleged sum is 150,000 Euro?

Another newspaper claims that the ex-minister has stated that the Ministry had granted the center a fund of 3,8 million leks for covering the expenses.⁵ Yet another newspaper quotes different figures: 100,000 USD in the first grant from World Bank and then another 2,7 million leks, while the subtitle states that the lost funds amount to 190,000 USD.⁶ Clearly, the figures are confusing, misleading, and they cannot all be right. As a result, the public is not informed clearly and accurately on the alleged corruptive affair.

Finally, while sifting through the in clarity of the status of the ex-minister in the overall investigation and amidst the confusion of a different figure for each article, it is difficult for the reader to understand what is really going on here. The newspapers tend to focus on the high political profile of Barka, rather than on exposing and investigating the affair. While Barka in his statement stresses that fund management is done by technicians and not the minister, the newspapers insist on opening the articles and the titles with the alleged involvement of ex-minister in the lost funds. While the articles clearly state that at least ex-director of the center and other officials are under investigation, there is no interview with these persons, who clearly are closer to the centre and the problem. As a result, the newspapers fail to fully inform what is the real problem here, what are the consequences, and what part of the process went wrong.

⇒ *Properties' affair*

Another affair that was widely covered during the month the newspaper were monitored was the scheme of registration of properties. According to the reports, officials of the body responsible for registering, returning, and compensating land owners, had falsified the acts, taking away land from other owners and registering properties to persons that had bribed them in areas with tourist potential.

⁴ "Barka, nen hetim per 150 mije euro," Shqip, 04.02.2009, f.23.

⁵ "Qendra e Policanit, thirret ne prokurori Kosta Barka," 25.02.2009, f.23.

⁶ "Barka ne prokurori: Nuk kam pergjegjesi," Shekulli, 25.02.2009, f.5.

The first trait that is noticeable when analyzing coverage of this topic is the pervasive use of anonymous source. In fact, this is a trend that is valid for most reports based on information from police, prosecution, courts, or other similar bodies. Almost all articles carry uncited sources, which are constantly referred to as “official sources,” “sources from the prosecution,” “police sources,” etc. For example: “the prosecution officially said that it has demanded forceful presentation.”⁷ Or: “According to the police, these persons are charged with the penal crime of abusing their post.”⁸ Yet another case: “According to newspaper’s sources, about 10 penal procedures have been carried out in the whole country.”⁹ Or: “The investigations have led to discovery of more than ten cases when this commission, based on falsified documents, has given out properties...,” said sources from prosecution.¹⁰

While it is understandable that not all sources want their names to become public, especially in cases of corruptive affairs, where various officials are involved, it seems difficult to believe that there is nobody that wants to make a statement. Eventually, these bodies always have a spokesperson and they are quoted. It is evident that either spokespersons do not issue any statements, or that the journalists have not tried hard enough to document their sources.

Another explanation would also be the trivial importance they attach to the qualification of their sources of information. So, the argument would be that the public does not know the officials in the prosecution anyway. So, it would be useless to quote them and make them public. However, in insisting to quote the sources, the journalists lend more credibility to the information they convey to the public. While for reporters especially of this profile is utterly important to preserve and cultivate their sources of information, it is also equally important to provide credible, reliable, and traceable information to the public. Furthermore, in cases when quotes are as vain as this, responsibility for potential lawsuits for defamation or other charges eventually will lie with the journalist, or the media outlet. Hence, all would benefit from greater efforts to quote the sources.

An exception that deserves to be mentioned here is that of an article where the person under investigation has released an interview¹¹. This interview clarifies the position of the person that most likely will be prosecuted, enabling him to provide his own information, side, and position. While such statements clearly should be taken with reserve and caution, if such care is exerted, the presentation of the other side, which almost always is missing, is an attempt to provide more complete information.

Finally, since the reports and the opposition claimed that the daughter of the Prime Minister was also involved in this corruptive affair, it is important to also examine coverage of this trait. Only a few articles mention this alleged involvement, most probably for lack of evidence and sources willing to provide information on this. In fact,

⁷ “Plazhi i Gjeneralit, ndalohen kater ish-zyrtare,” Shqip, 12.02.2009, f.11.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ “Prokuroria zbardh hartën e mbivendosjeve,” Shqip, 16.02.2009, f. 5.

¹⁰ “Pronat, dy akuza ish-kryeregjistruesit,” Panorama, 02.02.2009, f.7.

¹¹ “Gjylbegu: Akuzohem për 2.8 milione leke, ceshtja duhet të ishte pushuar,” Panorama, 02.02.2009, f.7.

most of the information on this alleged affairs has been provided by statements coming from MPs of the opposition. This coverage certainly reflects the nature of political debate in the country and its impact on media coverage and public debate in general. It is a routine of media allowing ample space to political declaration, sacrificing space and efforts that can be used for other, more public-oriented news and purposes.

⇒ *World Bank affair*

A major affair, which was extensively covered in all newspapers, was the so-called World Bank affair, which dealt with the destruction of supposedly illegal buildings in a touristic area of the country, in the framework of a World Bank-supported project on the development of tourism. The project is run by Ministry of Public Affairs and the directorate is headed by Prime Minister's son-in-law. This highly reported and controversial affair, draws even more attention due to this fact, and, in many ways, this fact shapes the final coverage in the newspapers.

Unlike other affairs analyzed in the framework of this monitoring, which are mostly based on official, but anonymous sources, the reports on this affair build on official reports, interviews, and political statements. So, the basis of information is derived from the official statements and official reports of the World Bank. These pieces of information were present in all newspapers, without any exception. In addition, all paper presented information on the background of the affair, the investigative aspects of the project's and bank's internal decisions, etc. The reports of all stages of progress and investigation were published, enabling a complete information of the public in this prism.

However, even amidst the publication of these official reports and statements, Albanian newspapers seem to be unable to escape to trends to personalise the reports. For example, some newspapers report that World Bank President Zoellick admits that this affair was a scandal in one paper, and was shocking in another. Having in mind the context, these are very strong and direct words, which are almost never used in this environment, and never are pronounced by these figures, especially in circumstances where assuming responsibility is involved. In fact, while the opening statements and titles underline this shocking qualification, the statements made by Zoellick reveal no such information. The old trend of clashing titles and article content makes no exception even in the coverage of this affair.

Another specific aspect of the coverage of this affair is related to the reports on the damaged side: the inhabitants of Jale, whose houses were destroyed. It rarely happens that this side of the story is provided in the coverage of corruptive affairs. In fact, based mostly on a long feature of the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, all newspapers published information on the inhabitants affected, their photos, photos of the destruction in the village, and interviews with them. For example: "We worked as emigrants in Greece for many years and sweat blood to save some money,- said Bashkim Andoni. -We returned for a better life, but the government destroyed our houses. We always pay our taxes correctly, but the government does not respond in kind."¹² Or: "I took a loan to

¹² "Banoret e Jalit thone se BB rrafshoi jeten e tyre," Shqip, 19.02.2009, f. 2.

build a cafe. Now the bank only gives me 300 ALL from my 1700 ALL pension, as the rest goes for the loan.” These quotes, interviews, and images certainly provide a more human and touchable aspect of the whole affair, something which is generally missing in similar coverages.

Last, but not least, due to the high profile of persons involved, the coverage of the affair could not possibly escape politicization. Since the project coordinator, directly accused by some persons as responsible for the affair, is son-in-law of the Prime Minister, opposition politicians and other persons viewed the affair in the prism of corruptive affairs of head of government’s family, abusing their post. Numerous statements and declarations followed from opposition and retractions and counter-accusations from the majority party followed, initiating a war of statements and counter-accusations.

Naturally, the media reflected and to some extent also became part of this debate. It is only fair to say that all newspaper allocated space to both sides, covering them regularly. However, it is also no exxageration to say that one of the sides received more attention and space in particular newspapers, indicating some existing bias or leaning of the newspaper in the overall reporting of the affair. For example, the interview the project coordinator of the WB project released to VOA was published in full only by one of the newspapers, whereas the others published only selected parts or nothing at all. While these are only details in a way, what is truly important here is noting that the politicisation of such affairs/ events is a pervasive phenomenon, where media transforms itself into an arena of political war and struggles, leaving aside its public mission and responsibility to the public, rather than other groups. Since this was a high-profile case and affair and the coverage was extensive, it only serves as a stronger proof of the lack of immunity of media coverage vis-a-vis other groups when reporting on similar affairs.

Conclusions

At the end of this monitoring, it can be said that the reports and addressing of issues related to corruption, the exposure of corruptive affairs *per se*, occupy a significant space in mainstream print media in the country. Although there are factual errors that are present and sometimes reports may be confusing, corruption reporting is an important topic for Albanian media.

In general there is a satisfactory coverage of this topic, although it often happens that the coverage is over once the decision on court or other instances is made. This points to a current trend in media reporting which is true not only of covering corruption: it is more important to follow the news events, rather than expose and cover the phenomenon. While the analysis of the different phenomena is left upon the will of editorialists and columnists, reports as such are usually limited to the news.

Finally, another important trend is related to the overall high politicization, a trend that Albanian media reflects to the point. Several affairs reported increase in importance due to persons involved, and not due to the impact these affairs have on society. Hence, the involvement in the political struggles has its impact on the media agenda and reporting.