

*Albania's media environment improved over the past year; however, the press has felt the impact of the economic crisis and growing political tension.*



# ALBANIA

The year 2014 was the first year in power for Prime Minister Edi Rama's left-wing coalition government, after Prime Minister Sali Berisha's eight years in power. In the past, Albania was refused candidate status for EU membership. In 2014, however, 28 EU member states granted Albania official EU membership candidate status, an achievement attributed to the will of Prime Minister Rama's government to implement anti-corruption and criminal reform. It also tackled the country's drug trafficking problems.

After communism fell in the early 1990s, Albania spent more than two decades trying to strengthen its ties with Europe. According to domestic public polls, approximately 90 percent of Albanians wish to unite with Europe. To do so the country must implement economic, social, and judicial reforms in order to obtain membership status. International actors are encouraging the Albanian government to consolidate the rule of law, ensuring an independent judiciary, which can tackle rampant corruption and impunity at the highest political levels. However, the lack of consensus between the ruling majority and the opposition has hindered the fulfillment of this objective. The prevailing conflictual spirit in politics, despite the peaceful transition of power following the June 2013 elections, also has prevented Albania from consolidating the rule of law. This spirit has not affected the harmony between religious groups, a trait Albanians have preserved for centuries. Not even Pope Francis's visit to Tirana and his messages for peace and harmony have helped mitigate the tense political climate.

Corruption and organized crime remain unchecked in Albania and are exacerbated by the absence of an independent judiciary. For more than two decades, corruption has been deeply entrenched within Albanian politics. In 2014, the reforms required to help expedite the country's integration with the EU were hampered by a six-month boycott by the right-wing opposition in parliament. The opposition boycotted parliament, accusing some majority members of participating in organized crime. It also accused the government of trying to undermine independent institutions.

Albania's media environment improved over the past year; however, the press has felt the impact of the economic crisis and growing political tension. The economic crisis has dried up funding sources critical for the development of an independent press. Political wrangling has resulted in ongoing misuse use of the media for political interests and gain.

# ALBANIA at a glance

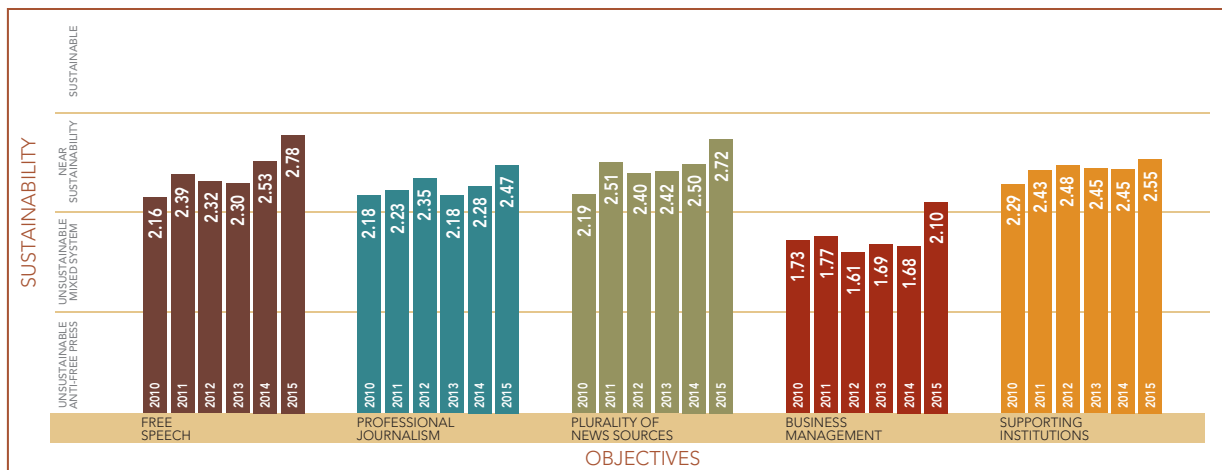
## GENERAL

- > Population: 3,020,209 (2014 est. *CIA World Factbook*)
- > Capital city: Tirana
- > Ethnic groups (% of population): Albanian 82.6%, Greek 0.9%, other 1% (including Vlach, Roma (Gypsy), Macedonian, Montenegrin, and Egyptian), unspecified 15.5% (2011 est. *CIA World Factbook*)
- > Religions (% of population): Muslim 56.7%, Roman Catholic 10%, Orthodox 6.8%, atheist 2.5%, Bektashi (a Sufi order) 2.1%, other 5.7%, unspecified 16.2% (2011 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > Languages: Albanian 98.8% (official—derived from Tosk dialect), Greek 0.5%, other 0.6% (including Macedonian, Roma, Vlach, Turkish, Italian, and Serbo-Croatian), unspecified 0.1% (2011 est. *CIA World Factbook*)
- > GNI (2013-Atlas): \$13.065 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2014)
- > GNI per capita (2013-PPP): \$10,400 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2014)
- > Literacy rate: 96.8%; Male 98%, Female 95.7% (2011 est. *CIA World Factbook*)
- > President or top authority: President Bujar Nishani (since July 24, 2012)

## MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- > Number of active print outlets, radio stations, television stations: Print Outlets: 160 (estimate); Radio Stations: 3 national, 56 local (Audiovisual Media Authority); TV Stations: three national, 71 local, two satellite, 83 cable (Audiovisual Media Authority)
- > Newspaper circulation statistics: N/A
- > Broadcast ratings: N/A
- > News agencies: Albanian Telegraphic Agency (public), NOA (private), AMA (private), Albpress (private)
- > Annual advertising revenue in media sector: €48 million (est., ABACUS Research)
- > Internet users: 1.8 million (Internet World Stats)

## MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: ALBANIA



## MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX 2015: OVERALL AVERAGE SCORES



### CHANGE SINCE 2014

▲ (increase greater than .10) □ (little or no change) ▼ (.10 decrease greater than)

**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.

Scores for all years may be found online at [http://www.irex.org/system/files/EE\\_msiscor.xls](http://www.irex.org/system/files/EE_msiscor.xls)

## OBJECTIVE 1: FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Albania Objective Score: 2.78

The Albanian constitution and supportive legal frameworks protect the freedom of speech in Albania and have existed in the country for many years. The basic laws that protect the right to freedom of expression and freedom of the press, the law on public broadcasters, and the law on the right to information reflect the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights, which outlines clear standards on free speech and further guarantee the rights of Albanians. A majority of the public appreciates freedom of the press as an important achievement since the fall of communism in 1991.

However, in practice, the panelists noted a gap in the implementation of laws that uphold free speech. According to Bajram Peçi, director of the newspaper *Shqip* in Tirana, “The extent of the implementation of the laws oscillates,” and the implementation does not always reflect the legal framework “both in public administration and in the judiciary,” which Peçi noted is aligned with political interests. The panelists cited the example of the former minister of culture, Ylli Pango, who was caught in a scandal of a sexual nature through hidden cameras by *Fiks Fare*, an investigative program on Top-Chanel television. The former minister sued the program, and the courts at different levels of the judicial system ruled differently. One court placed value on the public’s right to access information,

### 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 or registration of media protects a public interest and is fair, competitive, and apolitical.
- > Market entry and tax structure for media are fair and comparable to other industries.
- > Crimes against media professionals, citizen reporters, and media outlets are prosecuted vigorously, but occurrences of such crimes are rare.
- > The law protects the editorial independence of state of public media.
- > 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 available; right of access to information is equally enforced for all media, journalists, and citizens.
- > Media outlets’ access to and use of local and international news and news sources is not restricted by law.
- > Entry into the journalism profession is free and government imposes no licensing, restrictions, or special rights for journalists.

and another court ruled in favor of privacy, which raised doubts over the political influence that was exerted on the courts in this case. Kamber Velaj, editor-in-chief at *Shqip*, stated that the “Pango” case underscored the political influence and corruption exercised by judges who deal with defamation and libel cases. The panelists’ prevailing opinion was that even though international documents on access to information value the importance of informing the public over privacy, in practice there is a trend to protect privacy at the expense of the public’s right to know, even when cases concern corruption at the highest government levels.

In general, there is a perception that the public is sensitive to violations of media freedom, coupled with careful international monitoring, which has helped prevent the political establishment from harassing the media.

A special commissioner oversees the respective law that regulates the implementation of this right and access to information. The law protects citizens’ right to information without requiring them to disclose their reasons for requesting it. It also foresees the establishment of a register that reflects information requests and the replies given, as well as the administrative sanctions against public officials who violate the right to information.

In December, the law on Public Notification and Consultation was expected to be approved. According to Iva Seseri, a lawyer at the parliament, “The process of consultation with the public enables a greater number of actors,” including “interest groups, media experts, or NGOs, to contribute to the drafting of legislation,” thereby “further democratizing” the policymaking process. However, in practice, there are shortcomings regarding cooperation between public administration and the media. Even though the law on the right to information has been improved and more reasonable deadlines have been set to turn around information to citizens and journalists, the prevailing belief is that information is not considered public property. As a result, obtaining information remains difficult. This is also due to the fact that public administration officials must receive clearance from their superiors before communicating with the media.

Freelance journalists and bloggers have found it impossible to enter state offices or participate in activities that require accreditation. In practice, the process of providing information to journalists remains rather centralized and obstructive. According to Anila Basha, a freelance journalist in Tirana, access to information from state bodies is difficult. Previously, government decisions were accessible online, but now a notification is published containing the titles of the decisions. However, there is no clarification on the decisions’ content. “In many cases, the public administrative officials are not free to respond to the questions of journalists, indicating that they should rather ask their superiors,” Basha added.



---

---

The process of licensing is different for print and electronic media. According to the panelists, there are no obstacles or limitations to starting a newspaper or magazine.

Market entry for the press remains free, open, and equal. Financially speaking, media must comply with Albanian legislation even if they are not subsidized by central or local governments. The panelists noted that the market for print media is oversaturated due to few limitations surrounding market entry. Online media or media that use mobile notifications are not required to register in Albania. The panelists' prevailing opinion is that the licensing of electronic media (radio and television) remains problematic due to the political nature surrounding the election of members to the respective regulatory agencies, specifically the Audiovisual Media Authority (AMA). The AMA remains politicized, as in the past. Zylyftar Bregu, a journalism professor at the University of Tirana, said the institution's members are elected by parliament. According to a law approved in 2013, the composition of the licensing authority must preserve a political balance, with three members supported by the majority and three others from the opposition. The vote of the AMA chair, who is also elected by the parliamentary majority, enables the latter to dictate the AMA's decision-making processes. Therefore, "the agency and the licensing process is not independent from political control," Bregu added.

For most of 2014, the AMA has been unable to function due to political turmoil between the ruling majority and the opposition regarding changes to the chair and membership positions after the new coalition government was formed in June 2013. The situation was further exacerbated by the opposition's six-month boycott of parliament's activities, thereby delaying the restructuring of the AMA's constitution and the digital switchover process. The election of the new AMA chair at the end of 2014 has allowed the institution to move forward with outstanding issues.

Crimes against journalists are rare, as underscored by public statements issued in 2014 by the Union of Albanian Journalists (UGSH). However, a number of cases of violence were reported. In June 2014, while the police were carrying out an operation to uncover a cannabis farm in the village of Lazarat, the persons involved in the drug business destroyed the car of Gerti Xhaja, a journalist from A1 Report television station, and his crew. In July, the car of journalist Gentian Bellaj, of TV Ora News in the city of Vlora, was also torched. The UGSH appealed to the authorities to find the perpetrators. Perhaps the most severe case of a crime against journalists in 2014 was the failed attempt of a masked person to shoot journalist Artur Çani, who hosts the new investigative program *Kaktus*. The UGSH denounced the case as an attempt by the organized criminal world to undermine the work of Albanian journalists. The UGSH also has expressed concern

over phone threats received by Arben Vata, a journalist with the *MAPO* newspaper, and has demanded law-enforcement bodies to identify the perpetrators.

Generally speaking, the panelists explained that crimes against journalists are isolated and rarely result in physical violence. However, they noted that verbal aggression against journalists and editorialists has increased through the use of social media platforms, such as Facebook. Valbona Kurti explained that "assaults against journalists appear more frequently in online media," where journalists are subject to insults and verbal abuse because "online forums remain free of regulation" and are not subject to ethical codes.

In general, politicians are careful when communicating with journalists. In 2014, however, former Prime Minister Berisha slandered three journalists who criticized him by labeling them as parrots of the current prime minister. The UGSH denounced this act as verbal aggression.

Despite legal frameworks to ensure the editorial independence and development of public media, over the past two decades there have been no serious efforts to transform public outlets into an independent and real public broadcaster. Each government has instead tried to leverage public television TVSH for its own interests. "Public television has continuously been in Albania a television not belonging to the public, but rather to government and its propaganda, often misinforming the public," said Milton Nushi, deputy and news director with Albanian Screen RTV in Tirana.

In 2014, the current government was not quick to rein in the public station TVSH. However, instead of strengthening the station's independence, the government's restraint almost caused the station to collapse. Due to the six-month parliamentary boycott by the opposition, the Steering Council of TVSH was elected only at the end of the year. According to the panelists, TVSH, which is funded by Albanian taxpayers, is significantly more privileged than commercial media, which suffer the consequences of economic hardship that the country is experiencing. The panelists concluded that in order to operate more efficiently and to increase its editorial independence, TVSH must reform its management of financial and human resources.

The legislation surrounding defamation and libel has changed significantly since 2012. Although the full decriminalization of defamation and libel has not been achieved, those elements of the law that previously could have been used against free speech have been abolished. Defamation and libel remain civil torts, with the burden of proof resting on the plaintiff. The state administration and the government have not sued any journalists, and according to Cipa, the sanctioning of defamation as a civil tort rather than a criminal offense has led to fewer lawsuits against journalists than in previous years. However, panelist Remzi

Lani, director of the Albanian Media Institute (AMI), raised the issue of a growing trend in calumny and verbal abuse in online forums. Lani added that such forums create an “uncontrolled situation which might seem to favor freedom of expression” but that if slander and abuse continue online, there is a risk of favoring freedom of libel. According to the European Court of Human Rights in the case *Delfi vs. Estonia*, online portals “are responsible not only for their content, but also for the comments,” Lani added.

Albanian media are not restricted from accessing news from any sources. Outlets are allowed to reprint and rebroadcast programs in foreign languages or in Albanian; they are also free to redistribute information from news agencies. However, the failure to respect well-acknowledged standards regarding intellectual property persists. Shkëlqim Bylykbashi, owner of TV 4+ in Lushnja, noted that many Albanian media outlets obtain their “news from foreign media and publish or broadcast them without any contract or agreement, lacking the right to do so.”

Entry into the journalism profession remains free, and the government does not impose any licensing, limitations, or special rights for journalists. However, the panelists again criticized the practice of employing journalists who lack the necessary professional skills. According to Çipa, this is a problem that should be resolved by the community of journalists through self-regulatory institutions. “In all these years, we have proven we are not capable of establishing such institutions,” he said.

## OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

Albania Objective Score: 2.47

The culture of objective reporting, verifying sources, and consulting with experts has improved due to a number of training opportunities and increased professionalism promoted by university departments. However, the panelists debated these standards and questioned their implementation. Hence, there is a widening gap between the theory of journalism and its standards, on the one hand, and their implementation in practice, on the other hand. The panelists identified several factors that have contributed to the erosion of standards, which include the worsening economic crisis, the influence of politics on media, the pressure of media owners on journalists, and the lack of cooperation from public bureaucracy.

Panelist Peçi noted that even though there are efforts to carry out fair and objective reporting, the interests of owners and editors, as well as the editorial policies they follow, have not prevented subjectivity in reporting. The panelists were alarmed at the phenomenon of broadcasting

party activities rather than having journalists report on the activities. Instead, the footage is prepared by party headquarters. “This is a very dangerous phenomenon and in full violation of the independence and objectivity of media, as well as proof that the media are serving politics and relegating themselves to be the loudspeakers of party propaganda,” added Ilir Yzeiri, a journalism professor.

The economic crisis has hindered objective reporting, as newspapers, radio, and television have drastically cut staff and the remaining journalists face heavier workloads. In 2014, the Albanian Telegraphic Agency (ATSH) laid off 30 journalists. Commercial stations, such as TV Albanian Screen, also cut staff significantly. “Reporters are under pressure” and time constraints and “do not have the physical opportunity to verify news from several sources,” which is further hampered by the “hesitation of public officials to cooperate with journalists to provide information,” Nushi explained. Nonetheless, the panelists noted that media outlets in the capital produce higher-quality reporting, while local media show a decrease in quality of reporting, due to professional shortcomings.

A Code of Ethics that was approved by the community of journalists has been in place in Albania for several years. However, there is no self-regulatory body to ensure that journalists adhere to the code; in fact many journalists lack familiarity with it. The impact of the economic crisis has led to an increase in bribes accepted by journalists. The panelists noted that it has become common for big businesses to offer journalists gifts, such as electronic equipment, laptops, iPads, or even cars. Bregu said that mobile companies routinely give out iPads at the end of each year to reporters who cover the companies’ activities. According to Çipa,

## 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 and retain qualified personnel within the media profession.
- > 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 exist (investigative, economics/business, local, political).

---

---

“Reporters in local media [outlets] have a higher price”—they are often rewarded with jobs for their relatives.

Moreover, decreasing salaries for journalists also have made them susceptible to corruption. Until a few years ago, salaries were covetable, compared with many other sectors. The current salaries in the media sector, with the exception of a few famous journalists and columnists, are not high enough to prevent corruption among journalists. Nor are they high enough to prevent them from moving to another professional altogether to seek more money. “There is a greater number of journalists who seek a second job to cover living expenses,” according to Peçi.

The economic situation of many journalists became more difficult in 2014 due to frequent delays in receiving monthly salaries. In October, the UGSH noted that 18 out of 21 daily newspapers in the country were delaying salaries for their journalists and 94 out of 100 television stations experienced delays in issuing monthly salaries for journalists repeatedly. In 75 percent of these outlets, the delay ranged from two to four months. There are 75 radio stations that currently broadcast in the country; they employ 400 persons, out of whom 100 are journalists. The delay of salaries has occurred in 75 percent of them. Similarly, the UGSH also noted that in 2014, 167 journalists lost their jobs or left their positions due to unpaid work.

According to the panelists, self-censorship continues to inhibit journalists, who practice it out of fear of losing a job. Media owners often exert pressure to ensure that their editorial policies are in line with their political interests. Self-censorship is facilitated even by the fact that a great number of journalists continue to work in informal conditions, lacking both individual and collective work contracts. According to Vani, “Due to self-censorship and conformity, we have many cases when the journalist changes [his or her] mind or attitude, vis-à-vis a phenomenon or political party, if [he or she] changes his job to some other newspaper or television station.” This is an issue of professional integrity rather than technical reporting skills.

The media in Albania cover all news. This coverage is better in the capital and major cities, while the quality of reporting is poorer in more remote areas, where transportation and communications infrastructure are also weaker. There is sufficient freedom in the country to cover issues related to national and international security. Reporters are prevented from covering certain events if editors exert pressure to ensure that the media owner’s interests are not compromised. Such cases are rather rare; it is more common for reporters to cover events that align with the political interests of the media owner. There is no distinction in content or coverage of events between national and minority media. An array of small activities that are not covered in the media receive coverage on social media,

including blogs, Twitter, and Facebook. Media outlets are not inclined to report on mobile companies in the country that apply expensive tariffs, as mobile companies represent the largest advertising clients for the media industry.

Information, news, and entertainment are generally balanced on national television stations, which not only compete with each other but also tend to copy or replicate each other’s format. The weight of news has increased significantly due to the rising number of television stations that exclusively provide news. News, political programs, and debates continue to occupy a significant portion of prime-time television on most stations, as in past years. Programs such as *Opinion* on Klan TV maintain the biggest prime-time audience.

Facilities and equipment for gathering and producing news are of higher quality and more efficient in the capital than in the districts. In the capital, broadcasting outlets have received advanced digital technologies, while the means for gathering news are outdated in the districts. Many media outlets still occupy makeshift premises that were not designed as media outlets and have not been modified suitably.

For print media, the economic crisis has led to an increasingly diminished role for photographers at newspapers, thereby forcing papers to tap into their archives or use photos acquired on the Internet. Distribution presents another problem for newspapers. They continue to be distributed only in the main cities and almost never reach the rural areas, where half of the population continues to live. This artificially restricts the print media market, rendering its survival even more challenging in this period of economic crisis.

Journalists generally specialize in different areas of reporting, such as politics, business, health, education, sports, or culture. Currently, there are not many journalists who specialize in investigative reporting, even though attempts to investigate different corruptive affairs are ongoing. The television station Top Channel broadcasts the investigative program *Fiks Fare*, which enjoys a high audience. News 24, another television station, produces the program *Xhungël*, which is also very popular, while Ora News produces the program *Alarm*. The topics are varied, ranging from corruption within the public administration to issues encountered in public hospitals and schools. However, these programs are still very few in a country facing high corruption and where the trend of impunity for corrupted officials persists. Print journalism also carries out its own investigations in the form of articles. However, they have a significantly smaller audience, as the public is gradually consuming more television.

While investigative journalism has existed for many years in Albania, the absence of a truly independent judiciary that is ready to investigate corruption among government officials has hindered progress. Consequently, as time goes by, the

public has become less sensitive to the scandals denounced by investigative journalists and has observed little action after such exposure.

### OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

#### Albania Objective Score: 2.72

There are numerous news sources in Albania that enable citizens to compare and verify the veracity of information, opinions, analyses, and comments that come from a variety of sources offering different points of view. However, the panelists believe that the number of sources available is excessive in relation to the country's population. Although there are outlets affiliated with certain political parties, there are also a number of outlets that present a variety of viewpoints. Even television stations that are politically aligned still open up their political debates to all points of view.

An emerging trend in the past year was the rise and consolidation of online media, blogs, websites, and newspapers that host online forums, which are becoming an increasingly preferred source of information for citizens. In general, all media outlets have websites, which are also linked to Facebook and Twitter. The use of social networks, especially Facebook, to receive information has increased. The panelists noted that the only problem is the absence of the Internet in some remote areas, due to lack of a signal or lack of investment in a distribution network, which are provided by neither the state nor private companies due to the costs associated with developing this infrastructure.

#### MULTIPLE NEWS SOURCES PROVIDE CITIZENS WITH RELIABLE, OBJECTIVE NEWS.

##### PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES INDICATORS:

- > Plurality of public and private news sources (e.g., print, broadcast, Internet, mobile) exist and offer multiple viewpoints.
- > Citizens' access to domestic or international media is not restricted by law, economics, or other means.
- > State or public media reflect the views of the political spectrum, are nonpartisan, and serve the public interest.
- > Independent news agencies gather and distribute news for media outlets.
- > Private media produce their own news.
- > Transparency of media ownership allows consumers to judge the 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
- > The media provide news coverage and information about local, national, and international issues.

Citizens in Albania face no limitations when accessing domestic and international media. The government does not directly or indirectly try to limit citizens' use of any media, and no registration is required to use the Internet or install a satellite dish. The government does not interfere with citizens' access to any "domestic or foreign media, print, blog, or TV," Peçi explained. Kurti added, "During the communist past, it was forbidden to listen to foreign radio or watch foreign television, while today an Albanian citizen would be surprised if the government would try to impose any such limitations." However, there are financial obstacles that prevent access to international media sources—for example, subscription fees or even digital platforms that host stations such as the BBC, CNN, Euronews, etc. Thanas Goga, a marketing analyst, explained, "In order to receive information from Reuters or other international agencies, you have to pay."

Albanian public television TVSH continues to serve each incumbent government and therefore is unable to reflect the views of the entire political spectrum, hindering its ability to become a genuine public media outlet. The time TVSH devotes to government activities in its programs remains relatively significant. "The only progress made by TVSH is that it no longer assails the opposition"; however, the programming remains the same as last year, and the institution is "not credible, not reformed, and old," according to Lani. TVSH has never managed to fill the void left by commercial media—namely, broadcasting for the public good, addressing a wide range of problems, and conveying in-depth information and investigation—which are goals that have eluded the whole spectrum of commercial media.

According to the panelists, there are no privately owned independent news agencies in Albania. However, defining the term "agency" remains a problem, because it can be claimed that even a blog, domestic or foreign, can serve as a news agency. According to Çipa, "It is true that from a structural point of view, there are no private news agencies in Albania, but there are those bodies that can be considered online news agencies, such as Ekspres or Telegraf, which are used by all media in Albania."

The only genuine news agency that remains is the state-owned Albanian Telegraphic Agency (ATA), which is totally dependent on the government for its editorial policy. However, for years now the weight and importance of ATA for domestic media has been reduced to such a degree that almost no media refer to this agency as a news source. Only foreign media continue to turn to ATA regarding Albania's most important developments. Due to financial constraints, media outlets rarely turn to AFP or Reuters.

Commercial media generally produce their own news, with the exception of news on international developments. "You have



to send a reporter even [to obtain] a simple police statement or a trivial street accident, which is also a consequence of the lack of news agencies," said Velaj, recalling his experience as editor-in-chief of the newspaper *Shqip*, one of the country's biggest daily newspapers. Local media republish or rebroadcast part of the news from national media, but they also produce and broadcast news on local developments, which are rarely broadcast by national media.

From a legal perspective, media ownership is transparent. Anyone can look for information at the National Center of Registration (QKR), where media companies are obliged by law to register, as well as at the AMA. Despite these legal requirements, media ownership is not truly transparent, as registration often does not indicate the true identity of the owner of a company. "If you look on QKR's webpage, all acts related to ownership of the company are available, including the percentage of shares for each shareholder, but, while all is legal, there appear to be fictitious owners, too," explained Seseri. Bregu shared his own experience as a former AMA member. "The 94-year-old father of an MP is also the owner of a media [company] he 'bought' from the son, as the law prevents [the MP] from having business interests," he explained.

However, outside of the capital, where communities and media companies are smaller, public information on media ownership is closer to the truth. Public knowledge is clearer on ownership of newspapers, radio stations, and television stations, but it is more opaque on ownership of online media, blogs, and websites.

Several media owners wish to hide the source of capital invested in the media. For years in Albania, it has been rumored that "dirty money" has been invested in the media, yet this allegation has not been proven by any state agency, including the General Directory for Preventing Money Laundering. Currently, there are no corporations that own media, and foreign investments in this sector, with the exception of some attempts in the early 1990s, are virtually non-existent.

The media have become increasingly open to reporting on matters related to gender, ethnicity, social conventions, religion, and/or sexual orientation in Albania since the fall of communism. The reactions of different social groups to a range of problems also have been widely covered. "Representatives of religious faiths or of groups of different sexual orientation, organized in associations, freely appear in the media," Peçi explained. There is a magazine issued by the Roma community called *Amaro Dives*, but it is not published regularly due to a lack of financial resources.

There is no gender or ethnic discrimination in Albanian media around the employment of journalists. However, the

panelists debated the issue of minority-language media, with some panelists concluding that minorities' rights are not violated. Yet other panelists believe that more should be done to increase access and coverage for minority languages. "Every democratic state is not measured as to whether it violates human rights and rights of minorities, but whether it guarantees these rights," said Lani. The panelists noted that minority media cannot survive, citing that even in the Balkans, states subsidize minority media outlets, which does not happen in Albania.

According to Çipa, Albania's minorities are concentrated in specific geographic areas. This has enabled public media to use some of their past infrastructure to cater to minority groups—for example, radio stations and newspapers that broadcast and publish in minority languages. Çipa added that TVSH affiliates, for example, broadcast certain minority-language programs in districts where communities are present, such as Gjirokastër and Korçë. According to Seseri, the situation of ethnic minorities is not particularly problematic, compared with such minorities as Roma, Egyptians, or other groups. "There is discrimination in relation to their employment," Seseri added, "as well as their representation in the media."

Citizens are able to access information and news about their hometown, other regions of the country, and national and international affairs. Naturally, national outlets cover developments in different regions or cities of the country, not just the capital, which are of national interest. However, local media outlets give priority to local issues without ignoring important national and international developments. "In Albania, you do not find events, phenomena, or problems that are not covered in the media, despite the area you live in, because what you do not find in the national media, you can come across in local media, and vice versa," Yzeiri explained. International issues are widely covered in domestic media, even though reports are based mainly on foreign media as sources.

#### OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Albania Objective Score: 2.10

Albanian media, whether commercial or public, generally are not profitable businesses, regardless of the quality of their management. In print media, only a small number of boulevard newspapers are profitable, such as the weekly *Paloma*, which sells 30,000 to 35,000 copies, while the largest daily newspapers in the country, such as *Panorama*, *Shqip*, *Shekulli*, and *Gazeta Shqiptare*, incur losses. The business plans have little or no effect on improving the situation, perhaps because the situation is strongly dictated

by the fact that large-scale production of goods in Albania is scarce. Normally, this would guarantee advertising revenue and media income. But quite the opposite is true: small production prevails, and this segment of the economy does not necessarily require advertising. In this context, newspapers, magazines, radios stations, and television stations find it difficult to secure their survival only through sales or advertising revenue.

Most outlets continue to survive in the market because of subsidies that trickle in from business owners or other sources. As a manager of several newspapers over the course of many years, Peçi admitted, "If they did not have any economic and financial support, newspapers would have gone bankrupt many years ago." While media ownership can be damaging to the professional and editorial integrity of print media, from an economic standpoint, their financial support is critical to saving the print media industry from declaring bankruptcy. The panelists concluded that this crisis goes beyond the region, as print media are vulnerable and on the decline—and they might fall into bankruptcy at any time.

Electronic media are facing similar issues, as a number of television stations, especially in the districts, are subsidized by secondary businesses, a lifeline for these outlets. The panelists underlined a peculiar trend—the development of online media, which, in some cases, has generated profits. According to Yzeiri, *Tema* newspaper, which also has an online version, is now profitable due to the advertising revenue it obtains.

There are two main sources of advertising in Albania: one is state advertising, which tends to prioritize media closer to the government, and the other is commercial advertising. The advertising sector is organized on the basis of a market economy and is relatively developed. The level of fees varies from one media outlet to the next and increases in accordance with the size of the television audience or newspaper circulation.

The panelists noted that as a result of the economic crisis, with each passing year, the balance of funding for media outlets has tipped in favor of owners' subsidies, while advertising revenue has decreased. The mere fact that advertising has diminished makes it impossible for the majority of advertising clients to negatively influence or eclipse the news and informational programs produced. Yet Bregu noted, "Some businesses buy advertising not to advertise their services or goods, but rather to buy the media and prevent any criticism." In general, advertising is broadcast around entertainment programming and does not interfere with news programming.

The situation appears to be more difficult in the districts; local television stations do not have marketing offices due to financial constraints and hesitate to pay even

one advertising sales representative. In local media, advertisements consume greater airtime (more than two minutes each) and are paid very little. Local television stations mainly broadcast notifications on marriages, deaths, or timetables of transit agencies. According to Shkëlqim Bylykbashi, owner of a local television outlet, "Advertising has become close to zero in local media, and the journalist has to be converted into an advertising agent to receive a ridiculously small advertising fee." Some local television stations have joined together to overcome this barrier. According to Vani, owner of TV Mati, his station is part of a network of local stations: "We share information with one another, and we have an agent that we all pay for the advertising we receive as a media network."

Large mobile companies are the biggest advertising clients for television stations and newspapers. Due to their share of the market, and the dwindling revenue of media outlets as a result of the lack of diversification, there is great opportunity for clients to exert influence. According to the panelists, it is difficult to report on the high fees applied by mobile companies in Albania. "If Vodafone or AMC are your clients, you can afford to pay the journalists; otherwise, the subsidy from the owner is the only option," explained Nushi.

The panelists concluded that commercial media outlets do not have sufficient revenue and guaranteed sources of funding to prevent political influence. Businesses are aligned with political interests who inevitably influence their investment decisions and advertising strategy. Meanwhile, public media, although having a guaranteed source of funding from state budgets, are extremely dependent on the patronage of the incumbent government.

#### MEDIA ARE WELL-MANAGED ENTERPRISES, ALLOWING EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE.

##### BUSINESS MANAGEMENT INDICATORS:

- > Media outlets operate as efficient and self-sustaining enterprises.
- > 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.
- > Government subsidies and advertising are distributed fairly, governed by law, and neither subvert editorial independence nor distort the market.
- > Market research is used to formulate strategic plans, enhance advertising revenue, and tailor the product to the needs and interests of the audience.
- > Broadcast ratings, circulation figures, and Internet statistics are reliably and independently produced.

The government does not use subsidies to seduce the media. However, traditionally, in more than two decades of transition, the government has used parts of state advertising to reward media close to the government. Government advertising spots are different in nature, consisting of campaigns that raise awareness or even political messages and notifications. Legally, state advertising should be distributed fairly, but no particular institution oversees the enforcement of this law. The observations of civil-society organizations around the unfair distribution of state advertising have been ignored. However, in 2014, former Minister of Defense Arben Imami was denounced by the current government for corruption and abuse of public funds after granting significant advertising contracts to TV Klan, which at the time openly supported the government of Prime Minister Berisha. However, the prosecution stopped the case because there is no enforcement of the law.

There have been no new developments related to market research in Albania. Newspapers and magazines continue to adapt their products to market demands based on their own perceptions.

In the past year, there has been increasing interest in and a growing presence of international market and audience research companies, such as Nielsen, GFK Albania, and Ipsos Albania, and even local companies, such as Abacus Research, Data Centrum, Delta Publicity, and MC Monitoring. However, market studies are still rarely used by the media to formulate strategy or recalibrate programming according to audience interests and demands. Abacus Research and Telematrix Albania have started to report data on electronic measurement of viewership through people meters, but it seems that the products of these companies are not yet widely used by advertising clients due to financial constraints.

The sources of statistics are different; they come mainly from media outlets themselves, but they are not always reliable. Press circulation figures remain unpublished, as if to disguise their decline and not lose the interest of advertising clients.

## OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

Albania Objective Score: 2.55

In Albania, there are no legal restrictions on the establishment of associations of publishers and broadcasters. Several associations have existed for many years, but their activity and influence has faded. Their goal has not been to strengthen the profession or protect media independence, but rather to lobby the government on particular decisions or laws that affect the interests of media owners.

There have been unsuccessful attempts to organize local media owners into a common association. Shkëlqim

Bylykbashi, owner of a local media outlet, discussed his experience as president of the Albanian Media Club, which was founded in 2010 with Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe support. He stated, "The members of this club have never been willing to lobby for their interests" even when it comes to issues "such as the digital switchover process."

Several journalists' associations have existed for years, but they are relegated to mere names and are not active in any way. The only association that genuinely acts on behalf of journalists is the UGSH, whose membership has grown. However, it has failed to regularly collect the monthly membership fee. Consequently, the UGSH has not been able to financially support its members when they lose a job or face a health issue. However, the union has attempted to remedy these issues by encouraging solidarity among journalists. "We have called for solidarity with a colleague who was sick and should be cured abroad, calling on journalists to financially contribute, if they could," said Çipa, who is also president of the association.

The UGSH is clearly independent of the government and is distinguished for its activities, which include protests, public statements, and press conferences to fight the pressures placed on journalists or to enforce their rights. The Union also has fought against the practice of informal work among journalists, but with little success. Currently, a considerable number of Albanian journalists are employed without regular individual contracts.

In 2014, the UGSH had contacts and correspondence with some international journalists' associations, as well as with

### SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS FUNCTION IN THE PROFESSIONAL INTERESTS OF INDEPENDENT MEDIA.

#### SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS INDICATORS:

- > Trade associations represent the interests of media owners and managers and provide member services.
- > Professional associations work to protect journalists' rights and promote quality journalism.
- > NGOs support free speech and independent media.
- > Quality journalism degree programs exist providing substantial practical experience.
- > Short-term training and in-service training institutions and programs allow journalists to upgrade skills or acquire new skills.
- > Sources of media equipment, newsprint, and printing facilities are apolitical, not monopolized, and not restricted.
- > Channels of media distribution (kiosks, transmitters, cable, Internet, mobile) are apolitical, not monopolized, and not restricted.
- > Information and communication technology infrastructure sufficiently meets the needs of media and citizens.

international forums, such as the International Federation of Journalists, the European Trade Union of Journalists, and the trade union of Croatian journalists. As part of the attack on the French satirical publication *Charlie Hebdo*, the UGSH showed solidarity by organizing a protest of journalists and paying homage to the victims.

In 2014, different civil-society organizations, such as the Albanian Helsinki Committee and the Albanian Human Rights Group, reacted to all cases of violence against journalists, expressing their solidarity. "There is partnership with associations of civil society for all cases of violence or infringement of freedom of expression," Çipa added.

In Albania, there are a number of journalism departments at public and private universities. The panelists debated the quality of the professional education of journalists at these universities, with Yzeiri adding that journalism schools are not very efficient in preparing quality journalists. "I think these schools should be closed and media professionals should come from other sectors," he said, adding that on-the-job training based on the needs of the media market is more valuable.

Apart from universities, a significant number of training opportunities continue to be available at the AMI, which offers short-term training courses in different professional areas, in cooperation with foreign trainers. Some of the big media companies also offer training for their journalists. The panelists concluded that from a quantitative point of view, the resources for educating and training journalists are sufficient for the size of the media market. In fact, sometimes the training offered exceeds the market needs.

There are no limitations on the import or purchase of materials necessary for the work of media and journalists. Printing houses remain the weakest link and cannot sustain the needs of the media industry due to depreciated machines and outdated technology; advance rotary machines have yet to be installed.

The distribution of newspapers is limited to urban areas. The daily newspapers do not reach rural areas, where nearly half of the Albanian population lives. The reason for this is the very high cost of distribution and the lack of adequate infrastructure. There are four newspaper distribution companies in the main cities of Albania. Two national dailies, *Panorama* and *Shekulli*, distribute their own newspapers. Also, some other newspapers play the role of distribution companies for them. Another distributor is Albanian Courier, part of the Western Union Company, which distributes newspapers with its banking mail. The Mihali Company, another distributor in Albania, delivers two periodical newspapers and some magazines to cities outside of the capital.

Albania finds itself in a critical phase of the decision-making process for transitioning to digital broadcasting. Although

the law on digital broadcasting set December 31, 2012, as the deadline for the switchover, a subsequent law on digital broadcasting postponed the switchover to June 17, 2015. Albania is in the early stages of transitioning from analogue to digital broadcasting, and after several years of discussions, the necessary legal framework that will determine the paths of this process has just been approved.

Albania's telecom market continues to have room for further development. Penetration in the fixed-line and broadband sectors remains very low by European standards, and there are opportunities for further investment in network upgrades to help propel the country's economic growth through digital offerings and IP-based technologies and services. On the other hand, poor fixed-line infrastructure has encouraged consumers to use mobile devices, and Albania now boasts one of the highest mobile penetration rates in Europe. As of December 2013, Albania had 1,815,145 Internet users, or 60.1 percent of the population, according to the International Telecommunication Union.

## List of Panel Participants

**Aleksandër Çipa**, president, Union of Albanian Journalists, Tirana

**Anila Basha**, freelance journalist, Tirana

**Bajram Peçi**, director, *Shqip*, Tirana

**Iva Seseri**, lawyer, Albanian Parliament, Tirana

**Ilda Londo**, specialist, Albanian Media Institute, Tirana

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

**Kamber Velaj**, editor-in-chief, *Shqip*, Tirana

**Luftim Vani**, owner, TV Mati, Burrel

**Milton Nushi**, deputy director and news director, Albanian Screen RTV, Tirana

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

**Shkëlqim Bylykbashi**, owner, TV 4+, Lushnja

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

**Valbona Kurti**, journalist, Vizion + TV, Tirana

**Zylyftar Bregu**, professor of journalism, University of Tirana, Tirana

## Moderator and Author

**Andrea Stefani**, journalist and media consultant, Tirana

*The panel discussion was convened on December 12, 2014.*