



Limited Assistance for Limited Impact: The case of international media assistance in Albania

Policy Brief

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Executive summary

Overall, the scope of media assistance in Albania has been rather ambitious, aiming to reform all key segments of the media sector. It is therefore not surprising that the results have been mixed at best. The important elements of the regulatory framework have been put in place, but the reforms aimed at public broadcasters, the introduction of self-regulatory mechanisms, and professionalization of journalism have proved to be particularly challenging. While media assistance has been crucial in media development, external factors such as the market, the existing informality, the interaction between politics, business, and media, etc., have affected the outcome of donor efforts in the media field.

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Background

There is no accurate information on the amount of international assistance that was invested in developing the Albanian media system. According to a previous assessment in the period 1996-2006 support for media in Albania amounted to 10.6 million Euros. This sum constitutes just 3.9% of the donor support for the Western Balkans, making Albania the country that, in this field, received less support than any other but Montenegro, which is considerably smaller. The lack of formal coordination in this field makes tracking the figure on media aid more difficult. No formal structure for coordinating foreign media aid in Albania existed until 2005, when the Albanian Government created the Department of Strategy and Donor Coordination, aiming to coordinate planning and budgeting process of the government with the external assistance that targeted national priorities. According to this department's data, in the period 2000-2008, the total donor commitment to Albania in the fields of civil society and the media amounts to approximately €20 million, with a disbursement rate of 58%.

Figure 1.10 Media and civil society
Commitment vs Disbursement by Donor in 2000-2008 in million Euros



The 2011-2012 report shows donor commitment to media and civil society in the amount of 5.5 million Euros, with Sweden as the main contributor. However, the funding targets civil society in general, rather than media exclusively, which makes the figure less impressive. The main trend for this period was that the media sector was no longer seen as a separate one, but was often grouped within civil society, which reflects the overall withdrawal of important donors from media assistance in the Balkans, Albania included.

Media development assistance in Albania came in many forms: direct support for salaries, infrastructure, and capacity building of media outlets, journalism training, and legislation reform, humanitarian reporting during conflicts, support for developing financial sustainability of media outlets, reform of public service broadcasting, self-organization and professional socialization of journalists, support for independent regulatory bodies, etc.

In the early period of media assistance direct funding for new and independent media outlets was the most visible trend. Direct contributions to operational costs carried on for several years, targeting opposition newspapers first, but then expanding to include a wider diversity of voices. Development of local and minority media was viewed as another donor priority, at first through support for publishing expenses and later also through training for journalists. The majority of media that benefited from direct funding have disappeared through the years, unable to maintain themselves in such a poor local media market.

Improving professionalism of journalists has always been the most significant part of the assistance. Training has benefitted both the journalists and the media outlets. Another form of assistance involved strengthening and sometimes even establishing associations of journalists and professional training centers. Drafting sets of norms for journalism conduct and establishing self-regulatory bodies has also been considered important from the donors. In addition to supporting self-regulation and establishment of ethical norms, the assistance was also offered for establishing a trade union, as a way of strengthening autonomy of journalists.

Consultancy regarding media legislation has always been part of the overall assistance. Assistance for legal media reform has been sufficiently successful, introducing regulation in all relevant media fields, though problems in implementation persist. More recently, media legislation has been linked to reforms that would speed up EU integration process.

The reform of the state broadcaster to a public one has been another major challenge of the media system and of international assistance efforts. The legal consultancy regarding public broadcaster has continued in the overall media regulation reform, but long-term efforts towards reforming RTSH daily practice have been absent.

Main trends and conclusions

Albanian media landscape has changed dramatically, at least partly due to international media assistance. However, it is difficult to establish a direct link between the assistance received and the media present situation, partly because the assistance has been of low intensity and semi-continuous, but partly due to the complex interplay of a variety of contextual factors that have interfered with assistance efforts and their outcomes.

Nevertheless, one can safely say that media assistance efforts have succeeded in supporting a basic structure of a system, by helping the development of the regulatory agency and the trade union for example, and have also contributed to the broader liberalization of media sector and the creation of legal framework.

However, there are many obstacles for ensuring long-term sustainability of the results of media assistance efforts in Albania, and those regard two groups of factors: The first group of factors is related to the nature of deployed assistance strategies, i.e. the way of how international actors and donors approached the reform process in terms of programmatic consistence, duration of engagement, focus, commitment, amounts of funds provided, coordination, and monitoring.

The following is a summarized analysis of the way each group of factors has affected the outcome of the media assistance in Albania.

-Impact of nature of assistance deployed

- The overall scale of assistance was rather limited in terms of funding, especially when compared to other countries in the region, which limited the potential impact on the media system. Currently, only a few organizations work with the media, usually not exclusively dedicated to that field. “The development of media as a means to an end rather than as an end in itself is a discernible trend over the years,” a report on USAID media assistance notes.
- Most assistance can be considered short-term, intensifying usually in crisis periods, while long-term projects have been fewer. The approach has been mainly *ad hoc*, discontinued when crisis was over. Long-term engagements were primarily focused on legal reform and creation of professional education centers, but such a support was far from systematic and strategic. Moreover, predominantly short-term orientation and absence of strategy was combined with the limited coordination of donors’ efforts, and weak monitoring of the results.
- Some of the media assistance efforts suffered from lack of adaptability to local context. The very early example of direct transplantation of a German press law led to resistance and abrogation of the law. Conversely, local consent is not the only requirement for adaptability of norms and institutions. Even though there was nominal local support for self-regulation mechanisms, the council of ethics failed to materialize due to lack of sufficient interest from the media community and rather weak professionalization of journalism in general. Other

contextual factors, such as different priorities of the media owners and lack of independence and autonomy of journalists are also of crucial importance.

- Funding strategies for media development varied according to the media institution targeted, and have proven to be one of the weakest aspects of the media assistance efforts. Public institutions established by law, such as the regulator and public broadcaster, have depended on local funding, which offered them financial sustainability, but increased the risk of greater political dependence. Other institutions, as the trade union of journalists, depended mainly on international funding, having almost no local financial sources. This lack of funding poses a genuine problem especially for associations and media networks, but also for local or minority media established with donor assistance.
- There is a greater sensibility and pressure for media institutions to improve in the framework of the EU integration process. However, this influence should not be overestimated. Conditionality as a strategy of media assistance has had a mixed record so far, with the most visible effect in respect to the legal reform in the media. Still, conditionality mechanisms have so far failed to ensure absence of political and financial pressures on the key media institutions.

-Impact of local context on assistance outcome

The second group of factors has to do with the challenging nature of local context – in particular the weak media market, political and business influence on media system, and the weak rule of law coupled with strong informal rules and mechanisms of doing business.

- Assistance efforts have been hampered by weak rule of law and strong culture of informality that pervades all aspects of life in Albania. Hence, the success of legal and institutional reform is dependent on and affected by other actors. The gap between good laws and good implementation remains. All three institutions under study have been affected by informality at some point, in implementing the media law, collecting license fee, or implementing the Code of Labor.
- The general democratization process of the country, characterized by high level of political interference in all spheres of life including the media, is certainly a key factor that has affected all three institutions under review. The deadlock over appointment procedure and election of members and introduction of amendments that might weaken its independence was a direct effect of political influence. While politics, society, and media demand institutions that work in an independent manner, it seems that for politicians the greatest guarantee for this is the political balance of their members, rather than their professional

merits. This phenomenon has often delayed and hindered the work of the regulator and public broadcaster by creating policy instability and legal insecurity.

- The weak media market and slow economic development have significantly and rather negatively affected the development of the media institutions and the sustainability of media assistance efforts in Albania. The media market is small, overcrowded, and hardly transparent on its funding sources, often directing media outlets to their owners or patrons for financial support. The weak media market subjects media institutions to dependence on political and business patrons, creates relations of political and business parallelism, and results in instrumentalization of the media. Furthermore, weak media market has direct negative influence on financial sustainability prospects of media outlets and institutions that depend on commercial income, such as commercial media, or on membership fees, such as trade unions, for example. Media assistance tried to address this aspect, but there are limitations to what can be achieved, especially when local actors are not interested to change the status quo and when economic conditions simply do not allow for the growth of the market.
- Weak professionalization of journalism and the lack of tradition of self-organizing and self-regulation have hampered efforts aimed at establishing codes of ethics and self-regulatory mechanisms in the country.

Overall, international media assistance has been very important in shaping the current media landscape, though it has by no means been the decisive factor. The complete legal reform in the media and establishment of its main institutions has seen the continuous involvement of international actors. International assistance has also been crucial in introducing new principles of journalism with the change of regime, and in improving professional level of journalists. Although self-regulatory bodies have not materialized yet, the professional debate on ethics has become significant part of the profession. Media assistance efforts have been less successful in terms of supporting member-based organizations, hindered by the lack of tradition in this field. Finally, although strengthening the notions of professional journalism has been the main focus of international support, Albanian journalism has ample room for improvement. However, the outcome of this dimension of assistance is certainly affected by the context, such as journalists' rights, media independence, and links between media, politics, and business. Similarly, strengthening of institutions and their sustainability might have been another focus that needed greater attention, though informality, politicization of state and clientelism are other factors that greatly affect the outcome of any assistance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- A strategic approach to media assistance should be used in order to obtain the best possible results.
- The approach of assistance should be planned after careful cooperation with local actors and review of previous expertise.
- The planning should not just focus on the target, but also on the surrounding environment and how this affects media assistance outcomes.
- Media assistance efforts and media donors should make it part of their initiatives to coordinate these initiatives.
- Monitoring of the assistance outcomes even after the initiative has ended should be considered.
- Regular contacts with the main institutions and actors in the community would encourage a more realistic planning of the needs and approaches to media assistance.