

# Relations between media and politics in Albania

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After more than a quarter century since the fall of communism, Albania remains a fragile democracy and the path toward liberal democracy has appeared sometimes near and other times like a remote light at the end of the tunnel and, at certain moments, it has been perceived even as “mission impossible.” The country’s political and social elites, along their maturing process, have gone through a trajectory full of ups and downs, forwards and backwards. The building of the new democratic institutions has been affected not rarely by the syndrome of the Rozafa Castle, with walls going up during the day, but suddenly falling during the night, to start all over again.

The media too has moved along this trajectory of the destruction-construction of democracy and its institutions. Like in all other countries, the Albanian case has seen a verification of the theory of the authors of the *Four Theories of the Press*, according to which the media has always taken on the form and coloration of the social and political structures within which it operates. Especially, it reflects the system of social control whereby the relations of individuals and institutions are adjusted (Siebert, F. S & Peterson, T. & Wilbur, S. 1956).

This research aims to shed light upon the relations between the media and politics in Albania, starting from the historical and social context of these relations to continue with current prevailing trends that shape the typology of these relations. In order to also achieve conclusions with regard to the reporting of politics in the

media, we have also undertaken a quantitative monitoring. For a two-month period (February-March 2017) we monitored two daily newspapers, namely Panorama and Shqiptarja.com, two television stations (Top Channel and Klan TV), as well as two online news media (Balkanweb.com and Albeu.com).

## 1. The evolution of the Albanian media system during the transition years

The period following the fall of communism in the countries of Eastern and Southeastern Europe has been labeled by political science and sociology researchers a *transition period*. The term was then adopted by politicians and the general public, thus becoming a normal part of the contemporary lexicon of all Eastern-European languages and beyond, including Albanian. The labeling of the post-communist period as the “transition period” is mostly dedicated to the paradigm provided by the representatives of the theory of transitology, which is considered one of the most dominant theoretical approaches in explaining the post-communist transition.

Transitology (otherwise called “transitionology”) explains the process of moving from one political regime to another, mainly from authoritarian regimes to democratic ones, starting from the ‘70s with the fall of bureaucratic authoritarianism and dictatorial forms in Latin America, Southern Europe and North America to the developments related to the fall of the communist camp in Eastern Europe. One of the most prominent authors of this school, Dankwart Rustow, describes the model of transition to a democracy as a process going through four phases:

The **first phase** is that of **national unity**, seen as a preliminary condition to be fulfilled before moving on to the other phases. During this phase, the vast majority of citizens in a democracy-to-

be must have no doubt or mental reservations as to which political community they belong to.

In the Albanian context, such unity and such choice was reflected in the motto “Let’s make Albania like the rest of Europe,” which unified the majority of Albanians in 1992.

The **second phase** is the **phase of the prolonged and inconclusive political struggle** that prepares the taking of the decision. Such a struggle is likely to begin as the result of the emergence of a new elite that arouses a depressed and previously leaderless social group into concerted action. Yet the particular social composition of the contending forces, both leaders and followers, and the specific nature of the issues will vary widely from one country to the next and in the same country from period to period.

The **third phase** is the **decision phase**. When the conflicting parties realize that they are at a point of stalemate in their inconclusive political struggle they decide to compromise and adopt democratic forms of rule. For Rustow, there is always a conscious decision on the part of elites to adopt democratic rules.

The **fourth phase** is the **habituation phase**, during which, democracy rules gradually become a habit. (Rustow, 1970, p. 337-363)

In essence, transitology provides a teleologist explanation of the process of transition to democracy, during which the society, in its historical progression, moves toward a predetermined “*telos*” (*telos* – from Greek: end, conclusion, goal), namely toward liberal democracy.

However, according to some critics, the trajectory of post-communist transition may not be linear and there may be also

periods of regress or stagnation. Other questions and puzzles may arise in this context: the transition to democracy is a close-ended or an open-ended process? Could the word transition, which indicates progress, be also used for those countries going through stark political and economic crises? Could countries that are no longer under authoritarian regimes but do not manage to adopt liberal democracy be considered in transition? Is there a risk of return to authoritarianism instead of democracy, considering also the signs of some authoritarian embryos appearing in some of the former communist countries?

Albania too finds itself in this outline of the political-social transition toward democracy and in the hesitations or exceptions about it. After achieving national unity in the beginning of the 1990s, crowned with the establishment of political pluralism, the country embarked upon the path of creating the institutions of the rule of law and democracy. However, this mission was in the hands of a political elite that, having inherited no tradition in building liberal democracy, remained influenced, even unconsciously, by the totalitarian practice of building the state and the excluding and conflicting spirit of the single-party system. Thus, during the years 1994-1996, the behavior of the political majority of the time (which represented the anti-communist majority) began to display signs of authoritarianism, which culminated even in physical violence and imprisonment toward politicians of the opposition and opposition journalists. This made the transition from dictatorship to democracy to go through the intermediate phase that researcher Remzi Lani terms “the phase of new authoritarianism” (Lani, 2011, p. 42).

The Albanian political transition is characterized by a prolonged political battle and a high degree of political conflict, thus delaying many preparatory processes for the country’s membership in western and EU institutions, which practically were milestones



on the path toward liberal democracy. “It became clear, unlike the initial assumptions, that democratic institutions and the free market economy were not easily exportable and transplantable as a model in new democracies such as Albania.” (Lani, 2011, p. 42)

It was only after 2005, or more than 15 years after the fall of communism, when “the conflicting parties realize that they are at a point of stalemate in their inconclusive political struggle and decide to compromise and adopt democratic forms of rule”. At present, it may be said that Albania has passed the decision-making phase and has taken the first steps toward adopting the liberal democratic model. However, as was seen, this has not been a process that has followed a linear line; on the contrary, it has often been accompanied by phases of regress, re-emergence of authoritarianism, and moments of profound economic and institutional crises, the embryos of which we may say are still present in the Albanian society.

The transition of the media toward free and independent media has also been part of this general political-social transition. What are the phases through which this transition of Albanian media passed? What are the features and specifics of the Albanian media system of the transition period?

Karol Jakubowicz and Miklós Sükösd, in their article “Twelve concepts regarding the evolution of the media system and democratization in post-communist societies” emphasize that “what distinguishes the historical dynamic of post-communist regimes from other kinds of regimes is the large impact of political demand in the early periods and then the emergence and strengthening of the social demand and market demand in the ensuing periods of the transition. (Jakubowicz & Sükösd, 2008, p.14)

It may be said that such a historical dynamic has also been experienced during the transition of the Albanian media. Thus,

in their beginnings, the pluralistic media emerged and developed mostly under the encouragement of political demand and only in the later phases they begin to develop also as a result of social demand and market demand.

After the establishment of political pluralism in the country, also following a tradition encountered in many European countries, the first pluralistic media outlets were created in Albania, published by political parties, and thus spurred by political demand. One month after the foundation of the Democratic Party, which was the first anti-communist political opposition party, on January 5, 1991, the newspaper of this party, *Rilindja Demokratike*, began publication. Afterwards, during the years 1991-1994, newspapers of other political forces were published, such as *Republika* (newspaper of the Republican Party), *Alternativa SD* (newspaper of the Social-Democratic Party), etc.

For the author Besnik Baka, “if we look at it from a broad perspective, it was politics that produced free media in post-communist Albania. As a result, the emerging model of free press in Albania was the model of journalism remaining entirely within the political framework.” During that time, “the concept of freedom of the press was mainly confined to freedom of political debate” (Baka, 2011).

During this period, the media is engaged mainly in the transformation of the political-social system, the creation and consolidation of the institution of free speech as well as in the process of the introduction and democracy-building of the foundations of. This is favored by the urgent need for a detachment from communism and for establishing the new institutions.

“In the years 1991/1992, the concept of democracy was minimal, seeking the change of the system, and political developments or alternatives were stigmatized into black and white, integration was

accompanied by lack of knowledge, naïve expectations, utopia and populist rhetoric,” researcher Afrim Krasniqi emphasizes (Krasniqi, 2013).

During the first years of the transition, the Albanian media tried to emancipate itself but did not manage to transform itself from a party institution into an independent one. (Godole, 2014, p. 68). Furthermore, the lack of a tradition of the market economy in the country makes the market demand only have a minimal role in the development of media.

After 1994, besides political parties, journalists also begin to appear as actors in the field of media ownership, besides political parties. The journalists’ community at the time was new and without much western-style experience in the media. Nevertheless, it managed to realize that in the conditions of pluralism and freedom of speech, journalism could not and should not remain a domain of political parties, but should first and foremost turn into a domain of the professionals of the field. This period marks also the first serious efforts to create, at last, media detached from political parties, thus marking the emergence of the press that is the result of social demand, which at this time was linked with the indispensability of the creation of independent media. At this time, one notices a boom of independent media outlets, owned by journalists, such as the newspapers *Koha Jonë*, *Albania*, *Populli Po*, *Dita Informacion* and *Gazeta Shqiptare* (published by an Italian journalist and bringing a western print model) as well as the newspaper “*Rilindja*” of Prishtina that was printed in Tirana (Godole, 2014).

One of the main features of this period was the harsh clash of the power with the press. Seen from a broad standpoint, this may be considered a positive aspect; unlike today, the press managed to build a kind of integrity, with its voice heard and its influence

respected (Baka, 2011). During this period, the independent media and politics remained as two powers in unshaken positions, without close ties;<sup>1</sup> on the one hand was the critical media, an opponent of the government, and on the other the authoritarian power, unmoved by media criticism.

Publisher of Koha Jonë, Nikollë Lesi, describes the rapport of the media with power at the time as follows: “We were like two armies facing one another; we had a pen and the typewriter to take free word to the people, and the state had the police and the intelligence service (SHIK) to obstruct that. Or better say, to discourage, frighten and subdue us.”

Among the independent media outlets of the time, Lesi’s Koha Jonë newspaper played an important role during this period. Speaking about the role of this newspaper during these critical moments, publisher Nikollë Lesi writes: “If the newspaper RD (Rilindja Demokratike) killed fear coming from the communist system, the newspaper Koha Jonë pushed away fear to speak in a newly-established democracy, dominated by the psychology that ‘you can’t criticize the democratic winner!’”<sup>2</sup>

This second phase of the transition of the Albanian media also saw the instances of the harshest authoritarian conduct of power toward the media and journalists. Thus, editor in chief Aleksandër Frangaj and deputy editor Martin Leka of newspaper Koha Jonë were arrested and imprisoned; several other journalists were beaten, maltreated or threatened. The culmination of authoritarian conduct was seen in the burning down of the editorial offices of the newspaper Koha Jonë on March 2, 1997, by internal state segments.

1. Bushati. Andi, analyst –director of “Zonë e Ndaluar”, Vizion+: Interviews, October 19, 2010, cited in: Baka, 2011

2. <http://shqiptarja.com/media/2710/frangaj-leka-lesi-si-arrestoi-berisha-dy-gazetaret-ne--94-74518.html>

As a general characterization, until 1998, the media developed more as an institution of the political and literary world than an institution of the market. After 1998, with the creation and consolidation of capital and capitalists in Albania, the market logic also began to come into play. Powerful businessmen from the construction or other areas began to enter into the media ownership field. During this period, the media is created in response to the market demand, often surpassing or neglecting even its public function and coming at the service of their owners' economic and political interests. This is also the reason why different researchers (such as Lani, 2011; Baka, 2011, etc.) view this third period as the period of clientelistic media. Investment in television stations and newspapers was a new tendency for businessmen, for the purpose of creating a "kind of shield" for protection and strengthening of their interests, thus leading the media market to see great development, mostly in number than in quality.<sup>3</sup>

According to researcher Mark Marku, powerful private interests led to a "reconfiguration of the media landscape. This happened in a periodical manner with the subsequent entry into the market of construction businessmen Koço Kokëdhima, Irfan Hysenbelliu, Genc Dulaku as well as coffee businessman Dritan Hoxha who created immediately new media outlets that became the most important in the country. Thus, due to powerful investments, the newspapers owned by the first two (Kokëdhima and Hysenbelliu) also have the highest circulation in the market, while Dulaku and Hoxha own two of the most important private Albanian television stations." (Marku, 2012)

In an effort to distinguish and label the main phases in which the transition of the Albanian media has passed, various authors provide

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3. Bushati. Andi, analyst – director of "Zonë e Ndaluar", Vizion+: Interview, October 19, 2010, cited by Baka, 2010

different approaches. Thus, from the standpoint of ownership development in the media, Blendi Kajsiu and Sami Neza distinguish three phases of this transition: 1. First phase (1990-1994), when media owners are generally the political parties; 2. Second phase, (1994-1998) when media outlets whose owners are journalists emerge, and 3. Third phase (post-1998 to date) when powerful businessmen begin to found their private media outlets in the press, television and radio (Neza, 2010; Kajsiu, 2012).

The media and political communication researcher Jonila Godole, from the standpoint of institutional development, considers the first phase (1990-1994) a phase of Liberalization of the media, the second phase (1994-1998) a phase of Institutionalization or of the battle for free speech, and the third phase (post-1998 to date) as the phase of the Consolidation of the Albanian media system (Godole, 2014).

Author Besnik Baka makes another distinction with regard to the profile of the media outlets and their rapport with politics. He considers the first two phases (1990-1998) as the phase of political media and the third phase (post-1998 to date) as the phase of clientelistic media outlets (Baka, 2011).

The author of this research also makes a distinction into three phases in terms of the dominating demand, distinguishing a first phase (1990-1994) in which the political demand in the development of the media prevails, a second phase (1994-1998) in which the social demand appears alongside the political demand, and a third phase (post-1998 to date) whereby the market demand prevails, but often alternated with the political and social demand.

The table below provides these classifications grouped by phases and other indicators.

**Table 1: Phases of the transition of the Albanian media**

<b>Phases</b>	<b>Prevailing ownership</b>	<b>Prevailing demand</b>	<b>Institutional Development</b>	<b>Prevailing profile</b>
1990-1994	Political parties	Political demand	Media liberalization phase	Political media phase
1994-1998	Journalists	Political and social demand	Institutionalization phase	
1998 – to date	Private business	Market demand, alternated with political and social demand	Consolidation phase	Clientelistic media phase

Following this long and winding transition, at present the Albanian media system appears relatively consolidated and, in many directions, displays similarity also with media systems in part of the western countries. Hallin and Mancini, in their known work *Comparing Media Systems - Three models of media and politics*, distinguish three models of media systems in the western countries:

1. The Liberal Model, which prevails in Britain, Ireland and North America
2. The Democratic Corporate Model, which prevails in northern continental Europe
3. The Polarized Pluralistic Model that prevails in Mediterranean countries of Southern Europe, including Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain. These four countries, after overthrowing authoritarian systems in 1974-1975 (Italy earlier, after the fall of fascism) embarked on the path of transition to liberal democracy (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p.11).

At first sight, of these three models, the Albanian media system seems to appear close to the Polarized Pluralistic Model, also because of the similar experiences in the general social-political transformation of the transition and the cultural and geographic proximity with these countries. The majority of typological characteristics of the Polarized Pluralistic Model appear to be the same or similar to the typological characteristics of the Albanian media system. Below is a list of those characteristics, as presented by Hallin and Mancini, and that according to the author of this study and other authors, are at the same time characteristics of the Albanian model:

- the media are very politicized, polarized, and political parallelism is very high.
- newspapers tend to represent distinguishable political tendencies, reflected also in different political stances their readers.
- the political majority effectively controls the public broadcasters.
- both journalists and media owners often have political ties or affiliations and it is almost customary for journalists to become politicians and vice-versa.
- journalists' professional organizations and unions are generally weak.
- formal education in journalism developed relatively late.
- formal accountability systems are almost inexistent in countries of the Mediterranean. None of them has a national-level Media Council.
- poor consensus regarding journalistic standards and limited development of professional self-regulation reflect the fact that journalism, to a large extent, has not been an autonomous



institution, but has been guided by external forces, mainly from the political and business world.

- one of the distinguishing characteristics is the use of media by different actors as a tool to interfere with the political world.
- the most significant form of instrumentalization has been the use of media by commercial owners to exert influence on the political world.
- newspapers have not made a profit and were subsidized by their owners mainly to increase their political influence.
- in general, the level of journalistic autonomy is low in Mediterranean countries.
- the journalism style tends to put considerable emphasis on commentary (Hallin, & Mancini, 2004).

Naturally, the Hallin and Mancini model cannot be applied *en block* in the Albanian case, just as it may not be applied *en block* to other ex-communist countries. Aside from the typological characteristics of the Mediterranean Model that correspond to the Albanian model, there are also other features that represent and express the specifics of each country and, thus, may not be applicable to Albania.

Thus, unlike Italy, Greece, Portugal and Spain, Albania has a more recent history of the professional press. In Albania, unlike these other Southern Europe countries, the state has not played a significant role in the development of the media during the transition period. Also debatable is the fact that while some Mediterranean countries' media classified by Hallin and Mancini as elite-oriented, the same may not be said explicitly for Albanian media.

Meanwhile, there are also differences with regard to the level of

media freedom and freedom of speech, seen also in the ranking of countries by prestigious international organizations such as Freedom House or Reporters without Borders. At the same time, there are differences also in the quality of journalistic reporting and in professional standards.

## **2. Independence of the media and journalists: guarantees and risk factors**

The relationship between politics and media lies at the core of democracy. Despite their divergent missions, the relationship between them remains symbiotic, characterized by a high degree of inter-dependence. However, as Barner emphasizes, despite their interdependence, the demarcation line between them must be maintained. We need a sensible balance between media and politics for the sake of democratic society. This holds true not only for transition countries but also for all free democratic polities. (Barner, 2011).

In order to preserve this balance, the legal framework guaranteeing the independence of media from politics has an important role.

### ***2.1. Basic guarantees for media independence in Albania***

The leading document of Albanian legislation, the Constitution of the Republic of Albania, article 22, guarantees freedom of speech and freedom of the press, radio and television, considering them part of fundamental human rights and freedom. The Constitution also guarantees the freedom and right to information about the activity of state institutions and about persons exercising public functions. In an explicit manner, the Constitution prohibits the exercise of prior censorship toward mass communication means.

Besides the constitutional legal framework, Albania has approved and enacted during the transition years a special legal framework on media, information and mass communication. At present, the following laws are in force: Law on audiovisual media (2013), the Law on access to information (2014), the Law on electronic communications (2008, with some amendments in 2012), the Law on the protection of personal data (2008, with amendments in 2012 and 2014), and the Law on the press (1997). Parts of legal regulation related to the media are also found in the Electoral Code, Criminal Code and Civil Code as well as in other legal acts or by-laws.

Following a problematic period, in 2007 Albania signed with the EU and CoE the Action Plan for legal reform in the media, thus marking a turning point in improving this legal framework. After 2007, the law on audiovisual media, provisions on defamation, as well as the access to information legal framework were revised and improved. Amendments to the Law on Audiovisual media were approved in the spring of 2013, while defamation provisions were amended in 2012. Thanks to international actors and domestic organizations, libel was decriminalized and provisions in the Civil Code were improved (Londo, 2014, p. 59).

In spite of these developments, the legal framework on media in Albania was surrounded by a series of problems and a sharp debate between the media community and politics, as well as between the political sides themselves, which time after time tried to exploit legislation in order to exert greater control on the media. Some of the most tangible problems regarding legal framework for the media have been as follows:

*First, legislation did not precede developments in the media but was always delayed vis-à-vis them, thus creating anarchy and lack of regulation for long periods of time. Thus, the first law on the media,*

the Press Law, was approved in 1993 while the first opposition newspaper had emerged since 1991 and was followed by several others. Also, the first television station began broadcasting in 1995 but legal regulation for audiovisual media took place in 1998 and the regulatory authority for this field was only established in 2000. During this five-year gap, the number of unlicensed and unregulated broadcast media in the country reached about 100 stations. The legal framework was also quite late regarding the digitalization process. The first digital platform Digitalb began broadcasts in 2004, when neither the regulators nor the lawmakers had discussed or issued any regulations regarding digital broadcasts. Digitalb very soon was followed by another digital platform, this time on satellite, SAT+(Londo, 2014, p. 57). Meanwhile, the Law on Digital Transmissions was only approved in 2007. Among others, segments of politics and power also took advantage of these legal delays and gaps to put pressure or exert control on the media.

*Second, legislation was often a mechanical transplant of ready laws taken from the legal framework of western countries, without being adjusted at all to the Albanian context. Typical in this case was the Law on the Press, approved in 1993, which had been modeled after a German law, without any adjustment to the local context or any consultation with the media community (Londo, 2014, p. 59).*

*Third, there is still a strong tendency on the part of media operators to circumvent and not enforce the law in the media field in Albania. For instance, in a delicate yet very profitable market such as digital broadcasts, legislation, namely the Law on Digital Transmissions of 2007, was not implemented at all for years in a row. Such cases are numerous. “The establishment of a legislative framework for the media is one thing, but the application and implementation are something completely different. Laws are numerous, but the law for the enforcement of laws is lacking” – says Remzi Lani, Director of*

the Albanian Media Institute (Lani, 2011).

*Fourth*, in spite of the legal obligation to guarantee media independence, *political forces have used and still use legal channels to exert control over them*. A more detailed overview on this tendency is presented below.

## **2.2. Formal control of media by politics**

The degree of control of the media by political structures determines to a large extent the degree of its independence. The more controlled by politics it is, the less independent the media is, and vice-versa. Faced with the resistance of the journalists' community to influence the media, politics has often used its "weapons" to enable such influence. One of these "weapons" is the law, which is drafted and approved by the highest representatives of politics in the legislative power.

In the framework of relations between the media and politics, both in the early transition phases and during recent years, there have been frequent efforts of political formations to ensure in a way control over the media through law. In the early '90s, this control was more direct and more brutal and, with time, it appeared more sophisticated and more moderate.

The first strong clash of the media community with politics in this regard was seen after the approval of the Press Law by the majority of the time in 1993, only two years after the fall of communism in the country. It was precisely this law that is thought to have created the legal space for institutional pressure on the media by political groups in power, whether on the left or right, which controlled the judiciary.<sup>4</sup> The law was opposed by the media community, especially

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4. Fuga, Artan, Media, Politics and the Society: Escaping the Rozafa Complex, Dudaj 2008, cited by Baka, 2011

for some articles that envisaged administrative obligations or criminal punishment for journalists or their editors in the case of “unlawful acts,” without clearly establishing what these “unlawful acts” entailed. After long refusal, the media abandoned the law, until in 1997, 23 of the law’s 24 articles were invalidated and only the first paragraph of article 1 was preserved, “The press is free. Freedom of the press is protected by law.” Practically, after 1997, the press is without a law on its regulation and normal functioning.

One of the longest battles, continuing to date, is the one to control the public broadcaster (RTSH). The public radio-television is led in its activity by the Steering Council of the RTSH, which consists of 11 members, including the chairperson. According to law, the members should be proposed by civil society organizations, journalists’ organizations or academia. Yet, at the end of the process, the decision is taken by representatives of politics in parliament. The law clearly establishes that the parliament should select five members supported by the majority and five members supported by the opposition,<sup>5</sup> thus transforming the process into an act of decision-making of political structures. The eleventh member, which is the chairperson, is elected by the majority of votes in the parliament, which means that the political majority automatically secures the majority also in the RTSH Steering Council (RTSHSC), in other words, secures control of decision making of the public broadcaster.

Although civil society organizations have insisted that RTSHSC members be really selected by civil society, the result has always been constant in what Petter Gross, referring to a similar situation in Romania, labels as lack of political will to modify the law in such a way that would ensure real independence in the functioning of the public radio and television (Gross, 2008, p. 126).

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5. Law no. 97/2013 on Audiovisual Media in the Republic of Albania

This has practically brought a situation in which there is a very high control of RTSH's editorial policy by the majority and government in office. Speaking about the situation of public media in the Balkans and in Albania during the transition years, Remzi Lani says: "Television channels so-called public remain 'red carpet' televisions, in other words, filled with government protocol and information. These public channels look more like a Propaganda Ministry than as normal media outlets."

In order to enable RTSH control by all means, political majorities have changed often the laws on media, as was the case of the amendments in the Law on Audiovisual media in March 2016. Given that the RTSH Director proposed by the majority was not able to be elected by a qualified majority, the solution was found by changing the law to sanction that, if there is a failure to elect the Director in three rounds through a qualified majority, election in the fourth and fifth round would be by a simple majority. Such a "trick" made it possible to finally elect the majority candidate for General Director of RTSH.

In a similar fashion, are elected by politics the members and chairperson of another important media entity, the Audiovisual Media Authority (AMA). With 3 members supported by the majority and 3 supported by the opposition and with the chairman elected by the parliamentary majority,<sup>6</sup> AMA too remains practically an institution influenced by the political majority. This could lead to consequences for the independence and plurality of media, considering that AMA takes very important decisions on the licensing, functioning and positioning in the market of the country's audiovisual operators. The U.S. Department of State's Human Rights Report for 2016 emphasizes that the "independence of the Audiovisual Media

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6. Law no. 97/2013 on Audiovisual Media in the Republic of Albania

Authority, the regulator of broadcast media market, remained questionable. The role of the authority remained limited.”<sup>7</sup>

The selection of the AMA members has been part of the political battle in the country for a long time and has been used also as a demonstration of the political force and power. “From 2004 until 2008, the opposition party refused to appoint its members to the regulatory authority as part of the general protest against the elections it claimed were rigged and against the unfair electoral system, thus obstructing the necessary balance to take decisions. In a similar manner, when changes in criteria to elect these bodies were proposed in 2006, a heated debate took place and the amendments proposed by members were only approved with majority votes. Although these amendments were justified by the governing majority as necessary in order to ensure greater professionalism of the regulator and to increase its independence, the number of members in the councils and criteria for their selection were amended again, six months later, as one of the conditions of the opposition in exchange for consensus needed for the Electoral Code for the nearing elections. In other words, in spite of statements for the need to improve the professionalism of the regulator, this goal was sacrificed immediately for the sake of achieving an agreement with the opposition for a more immediate goal.” (Londo, 2014)

### ***2.3. Media ownership and financing***

Transparency over media ownership is of vital importance for ensuring plurality in the market and for avoiding monopoly and concentration. Ownership sources and origin also have an impact on the degree of independence and the integrity of the media.

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7. Link: <https://al.usembassy.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/140/2017/03/Shqiperia-2016.pdf>



In terms of transparency over media ownership, Albania has made progress and at present, the national business register may be accessed online and it features the names of owners of media businesses. The EC too has reached in this conclusion in its Progress Report for Albania for 2015, which underscores that media ownership has become more transparent while at the same time raising concern about the possibility of hidden ownership.<sup>8</sup>

At present, the majority of ownership in the media field belongs to private capital. State media do not exist, while public radio-television only takes up a small part in Albania's current media landscape. It appears that the country has moved from the absolute monopoly of the state media of communism to a monopoly of private media of post-communism.

The prevailing ownership model is that of media magnates who have extended also to other businesses outside the media.<sup>9</sup> The groups owning the lion's share in the media market and with the greatest influence on Albanian public opinion are four:

1. Top Media, founded by Dritan Hoxha, currently owned partially by the Hoxha family and partially by other owners. The owners of this media group have ownership or co-ownership of the national television station Top Channel, national Top Albania Radio, the local Top Gold Radio, the Top Records recording studio, the VGA Studio of advertising, the Saras publishing house, the Digitalb platform, the Shqip newspaper (currently online only), etc. Other businesses outside the media field owned by this group include coffee trade, food and services.

2. Klan Group, owned by Aleksandër Frangaj and members of his

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8. ALBANIA 2015 REPORT, Link: [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/pdf/key\\_documents/2015/20151110\\_report\\_albania.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/pdf/key_documents/2015/20151110_report_albania.pdf)

9. Londo, Ilda, *Media Integrity Matters: Albania*, AMI, Tirana, 2014

family, who have ownership or co-ownership of national television Klan TV, local television ABC News, local station Radio Klan, the television production studio Media 66, various businesses dealing with event organization and advertising, such as Zoom Entertainment, Zoom Events, Promo, Proimage, etc. Owners of this group, following success in the media business have invested in other industries, outside the media, such as construction, etc., thus marking one of the rare cases when they start with the media business and expand to other fields outside the media; meanwhile, the opposite has occurred for the other media groups.

3. Panorama Group, owned by Irfan Hysenbelliu, who owns successful newspapers Panorama and Panorama Sport and the magazine Psikologjia. In 2011, together with businessman Artan Santo, Hysenbelliu founded Focus Group, which bought daily newspaper Gazeta Shqiptare, online news agency Balkanweb, the Radio RASH station, and local information-based television News 24, thus turning into a media magnate. His other businesses include trading and production of foods and drinks, construction, trade of electric equipment and materials, etc.

4. Media Vizion is owned by the Dulaku brothers, who have ownership or co-ownership of satellite and terrestrial television Vizion Plus, the TRING digital platform, Living magazine, Living publications, etc. Other businesses outside the media field include construction, immovable property, trade, telecommunications, etc.

Two other media groups have more limited influence: one owned by Koço Kokëdhima and his family, owning the newspaper Shekulli, television station A1, etc., as well as the other group owned by Carlo Bollino and his wife Alba Malltezi who own local television Report TV, print and online newspaper Shqiptarja.com, etc. Both Kokëdhima and Bollino have a long story in the media and, at

different periods, have been dominating actors in the field, but currently their power and influence is relatively smaller than the four “big ones” mentioned above.

Part of the major media owners, such as those of Top Media, Media Vizion and Panorama Group do not have any background or previous interest in journalism and have purchased or founded media after success in other businesses. They do not have open ties with political parties, although their business practices time after time have been under focus, with claims that their media outlets have been used to secure favors from politicians in order to help the other businesses they own. This group of media owners is not engaged actively in public political life as protagonists, but the editorial line of their media outlets has certainly leaned toward one party or another.<sup>10</sup>

In a general evaluation about owners of private television stations, the U.S. State Department Report on Human Rights for 2016 states that “Although private broadcasters have generally acted freely from direct government influence, many owners used the content of their broadcasts in order to influence government actions toward their businesses. Business owners freely used media companies to earn favors and promote their interests with political parties.”<sup>11</sup>

The same report mentions the concern regarding regress in 2016 with regard to the risk of concentration in media ownership. In May 2016, the Constitutional Court ruled in favor of a petition from the Albanian Electronic Media Association to invalidate a law that obstructed a shareholding individual from possessing more than 40 percent of shares in one national electronic broadcaster. Some

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10. *Media ownership and funding in Albania*, AMI, 2014, p. 27 Link: <http://www.institutemedia.org/Documents/PDF/Pronesia%20e%20Medias%20Shqip.pdf>

11. Link: <https://al.usembassy.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/140/2017/03/Shqiperia-2016.pdf>

observers evaluated the decision as opening the way to potential monopolization of the really small number of national digital broadcast licenses. The EU, Council of Europe and the SOCE had criticized in the past a parliament attempt in 2015 to annul the same article.<sup>12</sup>

In order to avoid direct control of political parties on broadcast media, Albanian legislation prohibits the foundation of radio or television stations owned by these parties (Londo, 2014). In spite of this, the main political parties have managed to bring closer to themselves media owners and, in exchange for mutual favors, to influence the editorial policy of their media to the extent that the public perceives them as media of one or another party. However, as will be seen later, this configuration has changed during recent years due to a new wave of re-politicization of media during this time.

After the years 2000, a relatively limited tendency has emerged of media owners' involvement in politics, as was the case of the Shekulli newspaper owner, Koço Kokëdhima, the case of Koha Jonë owner Nikollë Lesi, or the case of UFO TV owner Astrit Veliaj who became MPs. Meanwhile, it remains customary in the country for owners, directors, editors and political analysts and in some cases even journalists to have ties with or be involved in political alliances.

Besides the ownership factor, funding has played a considerable role in the dependence or independence of media. In this regard, for many local analysts or international rapporteurs, the situation remains alarming. The EC Progress Report on Albania notes that media funding remains very problematic. There is almost no transparency and sources of funding are manipulated or erased.

Paradoxically, Albania has a very large number of national daily newspapers, a total of 25 (a very high figure against the population

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12. Link: <https://al.usembassy.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/140/2017/03/Shqiperia-2016.pdf>

number), which almost all declare losses, but still remain in the market supported by the incomes of other businesses of the owners or through unknown funding sources. “Most of these dailies may be considered ‘bulletins of construction companies.’ The companies support these newspapers with funds not for them to serve public interest, but to serve the interests of certain businesses. If you ask these companies why they spend money every month for an activity that brings them no profit, the response you get randomly is that through these newspapers, they protect their businesses. This probably is partially true, but only partially. By means of these newspapers, the businesses can exert pressure and secure favors” (Lani, 2011, p. 53).

As a result, the conditions have been created for the media to side with politics for the good of the clientelistic interests and to the detriment of the principles of independence. In these conditions, it appears that the media and politics, to a large extent, enjoy a symbiotic relationship regarding their purposes: politics supports the media to survive and obtain favors and, on the other hand, the media supports one political force in the fight for power.<sup>13</sup>

#### ***2.4. Organization of the media and the journalists community***

Similar to countries of the polarized pluralistic media model, in Albania too, professional organizations and the trade unions of journalists are generally weak. There is a tendency encountered in other former communist countries, such as Romania, where there is almost a lack of solidarity and real organization among journalists (Gross, 2008, p.126). This situation is found also in EC’s Progress Report on Albania, where it is underscored that many journalists are still unorganized and unrepresented.

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13. Baka, Besnik, *Media vs. Politics: Transition toward political (in)dependence*, AMI, 2011

During the years of the transition in the country, some journalists' organizations with national or local reach or based on professional profile have been created but they rarely become active. The most known associations that have played a role in the organization and protection of the interests of journalists are: Albanian Journalists' Union, led by Aleksandër Çipa, the Association of Professional Journalists of Albania, led by Armand Shkullaku, and the League of Albanian Journalists, led by Ylli Rakipi. At the level of owners and leaders of broadcast media, the Association of Albanian Broadcast Media is active at certain moments to protect their interests, led by Aleksandër Frangaj.

In their rare public reactions, the journalists' associations, including the Albanian Journalists' Union, have denounced cases of violence against journalists, as was that against reporter Eduard Ilnica in 2016 or Elvi Fundo in March 2017. In some other cases, the associations have protested for delays in the payment of journalists, failure to equip them with employment contracts and unfavorable working conditions.

During this year, we have encountered one case of the four major associations making a joint protest statement on a draft law that was part of the justice reform package and envisaged punishment for journalists in cases of "any kind of inappropriate influence on the work of special prosecutors or their activity on concrete cases through public authorities, media or other manners or persons, influencing the independence of prosecutors during the exercise of their duties." Punishment in the criminal code for this kind of offense went up to three years of imprisonment.<sup>14</sup>

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14. <http://www.lapsi.al/lajme/2016/08/17/shoqatat-e-gazetar%C3%ABve-i-drejtohen-kuvendit-mos-votoni-nenin-kund%C3%ABr-liris%C3%AB-s%C3%AB#.WcoTV7IjGM8>

Nevertheless, as a general characterization, it may be said that there is a lack or little professional solidarity, unity, encouragement and motivation – indispensable for transforming the journalists' associations into defining factors in the development of media and powerful tribunes for protecting free and independent media – among journalism professionals. Such a situation has led owners to be encouraged in their harsh stances toward journalists and has increased the latter's dependence on the momentary interests of politics and media owners.

An indicator of the lack of organization of the media and the journalists' community is also the fact that Albania, for a long period during the transition years, has not managed to have a Media Council, which exists in some countries of the region. Several initiated efforts in this regard have failed. There appears to be the same failure prospects in the initiative of a group of journalists who announced in July 2015 the creation of the Media Council,<sup>15</sup> which since the creation has been mostly inactive.

The inexistence or poor role of journalists associations has also influenced a poor level of self-regulation of media in Albania. "A first code of ethics was drafted by the main journalists' associations and the Albanian Media Institute in 1996. This code represented a new concept on the recently introduced profession of the journalist. However, it did not have formal support by the media organizations and its implementation was left up to the free will of journalists. The Code was revised in 2006 and the revision process included all interested parties in the media community, at all hierarchical levels. The newest

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15. Media Literacy and Education Needs of Journalists and the Public in Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia. Regional Report - March 2017, Link: [http://www.institutemedia.org/Documents/PDF/Rep\\_Regional\\_Media\\_Literacy\\_2017%20-%204.pdf](http://www.institutemedia.org/Documents/PDF/Rep_Regional_Media_Literacy_2017%20-%204.pdf)

and most essential feature of this code was that it began as a code of conduct and not as a code that covered the main deontological aspects of journalism. In other words, it started as an attempt to respond to as many toilsome dilemmas that journalists encounter in their work and not as an effort to determine the general principles, as the previous code did. The journalists' associations reached a formal agreement to support the implementation of the code. However, in spite of the widely expressed willingness to adhere to the code, concrete measures for other self-regulatory mechanisms were poor.

The low level of the development of self-regulation of the media in Albania has been influenced by a number of other factors, including employment relations, lack of tradition, as well as the lack of interest by media owners for self-regulation.” (Zlatev, Ognian, 2010)

As Hallin and Mancini emphasize, poor consensus regarding journalistic standards and the limited development of professional self-regulation reflects the fact that journalism, to a large extent, has not been an autonomous institution, but has been guided by external forces, mainly the world of politics and business. (Hallin, & Mancini, 2004)

### ***2.5. Editorial and professional autonomy, working standards and journalists' protection***

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, in its document “Indicators for media in a democracy,” views editorial autonomy of media as an important indicator of the level of democracy. This document establishes that media should have editorial independence from owners, agreeing on the code of conduct for editorial independence, to ensure that media owners do not interfere with the daily editorial work and do not compromise the impartiality of



journalism.<sup>16</sup>

However, in the Albanian reality, one can hardly find media owners who do not influence the editorial policy of the media outlets they own. Some may be more moderate in their interference than others and some harsher. However, it seems impossible to find owners who do not exert influence on the media in the name of their private interests. Media leaders (editors and owners) continually adjust editorial policies and news content to serve their economic and political interests.<sup>17</sup>

By fully ignoring the public function of the media, media owners in Albania treat information as private property and not a publicly shared asset. This shows that the “shift from the ‘soviet media model’ to the ‘social responsibility model’ appears to have been more difficult than had been thought.” (Lani, 2011)

As a continuation of the submission of media to their interests, owners and media directors (who are often on the same side) build fictive employment relations with journalists in order to find it easier to dismiss them if they do not obey their rules. The head of the Albanian Journalists’ Union Aleksandër Çipa considers employment contracts a trap for journalists. “These contracts are often unilateral and are often imposed. They may indeed be in writing, but they are formulated in such a manner that they often have no legal value. Media bosses in most cases do not give journalists a copy of the contract.”<sup>18</sup>

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16. *Indicators for media in a democracy*, Parliamentary Assembly, Council of Europe, 2008

Link: <http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/xref/xref-xml2html-en.asp?fileid=17684&lang=en>

17. Baka, Besnik, *Media vs. Politics: Transition to political (in)dependence*, AMI, 2011

18. <http://www.dw.com/sq/gazetar%C3%ABt-e-pambrojtur-t%C3%ABshqip%C3%ABris%C3%AB/a-37359205>

“Poor implementation of the code of labor, both for full-time and for part-time journalists, remains a very disturbing issue. Many journalists work without employment contracts or have such contracts that may be arbitrarily interrupted” – says the EC Progress Report on Albania.

This has led to the situation in which many journalists adapt to the owners’ interests and implement their agendas, often self-censuring themselves in their work. The U.S State Department’s Human Rights Report on Albania for 2016 notes “Journalists often practiced self-censorship to avoid violence and harassment and as a response to pressure from publishers and editors seeking to advance their political and economic interests.”

These interests have placed journalists under permanent pressure. “Although we have moved beyond the repression phase, it may be said without hesitation that we are going through the pressure phase. In other words, imprisonment and physical violence toward journalists appear to belong to the past, but the pressure they face remains and, in fact, is becoming ever more sophisticated.”<sup>19</sup>

This pressure and the lack of economic security have decreased the independence of journalists and as a result have influenced the decline of professional standards and bias in reporting.

### **3. Current trends in the relations between media and politics in Albania**

From 2013, Albania is governed by political forces of the leftwing. After a relatively successful 4-year mandate in macro terms, the SP managed to win the elections in June of this year alone, sending to

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19. Lani, Remzi, *Balkan Media: Lost in transition?*In: Professional Journalism and Self-Regulation. New Media, Old Dilemmas in Southeastern Europe and Turkey, UNESCO 2011

opposition its ally of the previous mandate, the LSI, and gathering around itself even greater power and responsibility.

In terms of media freedom, the period after 2013 to date has seen a slight improvement, referring to data from the Press Freedom Index, published by the prestigious international organization Reporters without Borders. Thus, for 2017, Albania climbed some steps, ranking 76<sup>th</sup> compared to 82<sup>nd</sup> in 2016 and 2015.<sup>20</sup> However, according to the Freedom House classification, the country remains in the spectrum of “partially free” countries with regard to the general situation of freedom.

What are some of the main current tendencies that dominated the development of relations between media and politics and what has changed in the essence and in the symbiosis of these relations? Below is an attempt to bring some of the tendencies outlined during this time, taking a look both at the level of mediatization of politics as well as the politicization of the media.

### *3.1. The winner takes it all?*<sup>21</sup>

During these years, there has been increased mediatization of politics, shown in the increase of media channels used by political parties and politicians as well as in the increase of time and space reserved for politics in mass communication media. The increase of the influence of media in achieving political objectives or goals is at the essence of the process of mediatization of politics. In this regard, we may say without hesitation that the sensational victory of the SP on June 25, 2017, came as a result also of the increased media influence in the context of the intensification of mediatization by the SP and its leader Edi Rama.

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20. <https://rsf.org/en/albania>

21. A paraphrase of a known ABBA song.

Besides the process of mediatization of politics, we have also noticed a change in the conduct and rapport of media actors, especially owners, with politics in general and governance in particular, leading to a reconfiguration in the media's approach to political sides and in some cases even a change of their editorial policies.

The Freedom House Report on Albania states that since the local elections of 2015, according to monitoring by the OSCE, it was discovered that all main media, including the public broadcaster, favored one of the main political parties, referring to the Socialist Party.<sup>22</sup> The concern that some of the country's main media outlets have changed editorial policies adopting a conformist or supportive policy toward current power has been articulated strongly, especially in the case of the termination or interruption by the owners of contracts for some media directors, such as Armand Shkullaku of ABC News, Alfred Lela of Mapo newspaper, Mentor Kikia, news editor at Top Channel, and particularly the dismissal of Alida Tota from her position as director of information at A1 TV.<sup>23</sup>

With developments during the last four years, it appears that we have reached the situation in which almost all the important media outlets, with rare exceptions, have lined up mostly on the side of power, harming their public mission in the name of business interests and abandoning increasingly the position of the "four estate." In fact, some of them stage more opposition to the opposition than to the government. In terms of the authority of power on them, Fatos Lubonja thinks that we have to do with a kind of "Putinization of media." Regarding journalists who once

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22. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2016/albania>

23. <http://www.newsbomb.al/levizje-dhe-shkarkime-te-bujshme-ne-boten-e-medias-shqiptare-nga-mentor-kikia-te-armand-shkullaku-cfare-ndodhi-ne-6-muaj-65296>

were divided into two groups, Lubonja now says they are in one trench, that of the party in power.<sup>24</sup>

Although there are no reports of direct pressure by the government on media to change their editorial policies, it appears that the mentioned changes may have come in exchange for favors for different businesses of the owners of these media outlets, through a hidden clientelistic practice developed behind the scenes between media owners and politics. The most betrayed in this clientelistic flirt is the public and its interests.

### ***3.2. New dimensions in the re-politicization and instrumentalization of the media***

One of the characteristics of media in Mediterranean countries, which Albania's media have similarities with, is their polarization and politicization. "As shown by history, media in Mediterranean countries are very politicized and political parallelism is very high. Newspapers tend to represent discernible political tendencies." (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 98). In these countries, a group of media continuously supports leftwing parties while another group of media supports rightwing parties, consistently adhering to their profile.

With the appearance of clientelism in the media, after 1998 this division began to crystalize and deepen in Albania too. Such a division is noted in the Freedom House Report that emphasizes that "the intermingling of powerful business, political, and media interests inhibits the development of independent news outlets; most are seen as biased toward either the PS or the PD."<sup>25</sup>

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24. <http://www.dw.com/sq/gazetar%C3%ABt-e-pambrojtur-t%C3%AB-shqip%C3%ABris%C3%AB/a-37359205>

25. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2016/albania>

The “surprise” of recent times lies in the fact that this kind of polarization appears to be assuming new forms. First, it seems to be a shift from rightwing vs. leftwing media polarization to government media vs. opposition media. The ideological course is not pursued also due to the fact that political parties have not adhered to one ideological profile. Paradoxically in Albania, parties considered of the leftwing have applied more rightwing policies in their governance.

Secondly, many outlets, including some of the main media, have recently abandoned political loyalty and are moving from a “honey moon” with the DP government to a “honey moon” with the SP government, adjusting their editorial course and policy with the course and policy of the political winner, simply and only to protect and advance their business interests. As a development, this is naturally graver and more consequential than constant and sustainable political polarization and parallelism and leads to a serious compromise of the role of the media and to devastation and elimination of public trust in it.

This situation of the submission of media to the interests of business and politics has been exploited by the latter to increase the level of their instrumentalization for its needs and purposes. The battle horse in this case has been PR. Like never before, PR offices of political parties and state institutions are using the media to not only convey messages but also ready political content often broadcast without any filter by the media.

Based on research conducted in the framework of this study, there are data that point to a high presence of news that simply “transcribe” content of PR offices. The table below presents the situation in the two national television stations, two national newspapers and two news portals monitored during the months of February and March 2017.

**Table no.2. Percentage of PR-based political news**

<b>Media</b>	<b>Total number of political stories</b>	<b>No of PR-based political news</b>	<b>Percentage of PR-based political news</b>
Top Channel	148	53	35.81%
Klan	152	51	33.55%
Panorama	573	118	20.6%
Shqiptarja.com	772	127	16.5%
Balkanweb	716	143	15.90%
Albeu	558	101	15.18%

*Source: Monitoring conducted in the framework of this study*

As may be seen in the table, political PR-based news is found in higher percentage in television. Thus, more than one third of the political news in television originate from PR office materials. This is explained by the fact that the greatest investment of political PR offices is focused on television given that the press is in a crisis and has increasingly less audience, while online portals are not much of a target because political parties have their own online channels to communicate directly with the web public.

In this context, we would like to clarify that during the monitoring conducted for this study, “political stories” included news related to political parties and politicians and news related to the activity of state institutions. PR-based stories include only stories based directly on material from public relations offices of political parties and state institutions. The cases when journalists followed political events in the field themselves and reported on them were not included in this category. Taking into consideration the fact that most of these political events are part of public relations activities, the number and percentage of PR-based stories would be much higher than those seen in the table above.

Drastic developments have been seen recently also with the so-called “ready tapes.” From a phenomenon and problem of electoral campaign periods, “ready tapes” are now an omnipresent phenomenon and problem. Monitoring of 30 news editions of the 19:30 time slot on Klan TV and Top Channel discovered the following presence of ready tapes during the months of February and March 2017, long before the electoral campaign:

**Table no.3. Number of ready tapes broadcast in 30 news editions**

Media	SP tapes	DP tapes	Tirana City Hall tapes
Top-Channel	3	6	23
Klan	7	2	24

*Source: Monitoring conducted in the framework of this study*

As may be seen from the data, the SP is present in Top Channel in 3 of 30 news editions while the DP in 6 such. On TV Klan, the SP is present in 7 of 30 news editions and the DP in 2 such. We stress that the months of February and March when the monitoring took place saw the ongoing protest of the DP known as the “tent protest.”

Based on data it appears that Top Channel is more open to DP tapes than Klan TV, while Klan TV is more open to SP tapes than Top Channel.

What is most striking in the table above is particularly the storming of the two national television stations with “ready tapes” by Tirana City Hall, a new trend for this institution, initiated by the current Mayor of Tirana from his election to the post. Of 30 news editions on Top Channel, Tirana City Hall was present with “ready tapes” in 23 of them (or in 77% of them) while on TV Klan, Tirana City Hall was present with “ready tapes” in 24 of 30 news editions (or in 80% of them).



TV Klan identifies the “ready tapes” as such while Top Channel does not.

The debate on “ready tapes” was opened again ahead of the electoral campaign of the 2017 elections and part of the broadcast media came out with a statement that they would not broadcast them. However, resistance only lasted a few days and they began to air them citing the obligation of the Electoral Code.

Many of them may argue that the practice of “ready tapes” is a natural and modern development within the context of the mediatization of politics. However, to the author of this study, in the Albanian context, more than a mediatization of politics, they represent an instrumentalization of the media by the PR offices of politics or state institutions, causing harm to their independence and integrity.

### ***3.3. Politics challenges the mediation of traditional media***

With the massive spread of the internet and online communication, Politics 2.0 (otherwise known as *cyberpolitics*) has expanded increasingly. This means the use of interactive online channels for political communication. For years in Albania, the Socialist Party and its leader have created some kind of superiority compared to other political forces, being more innovative and more inclined to apply the latest novelties of virtual communication for their needs and goals, which is seen in the larger number of followers online.

Besides other things, the internet creates the possibility for political actors to enter into direct communication without the need for the mediation of traditional media. In the online environment, parties can be media themselves, can have their web TV or web Radio, create their own YouTube channel or *fan pages* in social networks, etc. Through the web, they reach young age groups and internet

users of all age groups much better than through traditional media.

The most sensational development in Albanian politics 2.0 has been the opening in March 2017 of ERTV, a kind of web TV that carries the initials of the Prime Minister and SP Chairman Edi Rama, which broadcasts live feeds besides from stories. At present, ERTV has turned into a media trademark and its videos are very frequently broadcast on traditional television stations, but in reversed roles: while once politics summoned the media for help in its communication with audiences, now it is the traditional media that summon politics (ERTV) for help in mediating to bring information about political events to the public.

Another way that challenges the mediation of traditional media is the replacement of traditional press statements of politicians with statuses on individual or institutional profiles on Facebook or Twitter. The number of stories generated based on these statuses is on the rise. Based on the monitoring conducted in the context of this research study, it results that for all three media categories (press, TV, online) an average of 1 out of 10 stories from politics originated from Facebook or Twitter, thus marking some kind of Facebook-ization of political reporting.

The submissive position of Albanian traditional media to politics and the security gained through the capacities of cyber-politics has encouraged, time after time, a populist discourse in the political communication of the Albanian Prime Minister, who is also the head of the SP. ERTV in some cases has served as a window into Populism 2.0 of the Prime Minister, through footage of meetings with people and through stories that carefully pick the most attractive populist rhetoric that is thought to produce the greatest possible impact on the public.

Furthermore, the above circumstances have encouraged Edi Rama

to throw in the last glove of duel to the media, declaring “open war” on them –a communication strategy that has been used by American President Donald Trump or other current leaders of global politics. While Trump attacked media against him as “fake media,” Edi Rama used in one of the Opinion shows in September 2016 the metaphor “basin media,” inviting his opponents in the media to a duel. He continued the battle with the media further on the verge of the electoral campaign when he labeled by name many of the country’s known analysts as part of the “basin media.”

Naturally, the challenge to the media, circumventing or ignoring it and the “attack” for electoral purposes might produce momentary benefits for politics. Yet, from a long-term point of view, it cultivates a negative perception and a denying spirit for the media and journalists without distinction, leaving the public to be, on the one hand, prey to the increased number of *fake news* and manipulated social network information and, on the other, prey of the discourse of populist politicians, which may produce a new authoritarianism with consequences for democracy.

On the other hand, the transformation of politics or state itself into media may be considered also as an effort at some kind of delegitimization of the “fourth estate,” kicking it out of the game and turning information into a function of the three other powers and their public relations. This would represent a very dangerous precedent for the functioning of a democratic society.

### ***3.4. Increasing politicization and opinionization of media and the society***

Whether consciously or not, it may be said that politics at present has managed to be at the center of the public attention of Albanians, in fact, much more than it should. The media has played a major role

in this excessive politicization of the society. At present, we may talk about the “bombardment” of the public with politics, which appears at several levels:

First, in the increase of time or space of the media filled with political content. Thus, it has become almost normal for the country’s television stations, particularly the all-news stations, to broadcast *live* for hours in a row all the main political events, starting from the parliament’s plenary sessions or committee member meetings and continuing with the congresses or conventions of the main political parties as well as other smaller parties. The *live* camera of televisions has often entered meetings or events of Tirana Municipality or other state institutions as well as events that may not have had much public interest.

Besides *live* broadcasts, we notice an increased presence of political news in television news editions or newspaper pages. The monitoring conducted as part of this research study has found that some media outlets give more priority to politics, making political news often the leading story of the newspaper or of TV news edition. The following table presents monitoring data in this regard:

**Table no.4. The number and percentage of news editions that had a political story as the leading or main story**

<b>Media</b>	<b>No. of monitored news editions</b>	<b>No. of news editions that had a political story as the leading or main story</b>	<b>Percentage of news editions that had a political story as the leading or main story</b>
Top Channel	30	21	70%
Klan	30	10	33%
Panorama	59	22	37.3%
Shqiptarja.com	51	41	80%

*Source: Monitoring conducted in the framework of this research study*

As may be seen, there is a difference between the different media outlets in their preferences for political news as a leading or main story. Top Channel is more inclined than TV Klan to start its main news edition with such stories. Out of 30 news editions of Top Channel that were monitored, 21 (or 70%) start with a political story. In this regard, TV Klan's percentage is about twice smaller (33%). The situation is similar also in the reporting in newspapers Panorama and Shqiptarja.com. Of 51 editions of Shqiptarja.com, 41 (or 80%) have a political story lead in the front page, while in Panorama, only 22 of 59 editions (or 37.3%) have such a story in their lead. We emphasize that Panorama has a specific as it has chosen to have not one but two leading stories and we counted both.

The monitoring also provides data about the average length of political stories within a news edition in both national television stations Top Channel and TV Klan as well as data on the average number and percentage of political stories published in one day in the two news portals Balkanweb.com and Albeu.com. We monitored

respectively 30 news editions of the 19.30 time slot in each of them during the February-March period, while we monitored 30 randomly selected days during this period in the online portals. The press monitoring was a bit more extensive and included all editions published by the two newspapers during February and March 2017. The Panorama newspaper, published every day of the week, had a total of 59 editions during this period, while Shqiptarja.com, which publishes 6 days a week, had 51 editions.

With regard to monitoring on television, the situation is presented in the following table.

**Table no.5.Length of political stories on TV**

<b>Media</b>	<b>Average length of a news edition (minutes)</b>	<b>Average length of political stories (minutes)</b>	<b>% of time for political stories</b>
Top-Channel	30.24	9.85	32%
Klan TV	30.01	6.43	21%

*Source: Monitoring conducted in the framework of this research study*

As may be seen, on Top Channel, of 30.24 minutes of the average length of the news editions, 9.85 minutes or about one third of the time (32%) was taken up by political stories. On TV Klan, time length appears shorter for political stories compared to Top Channel, with about 21% of the time. Nevertheless, the time length criterion is not the only indicator, because the number of political stories within the total number of stories is also important. In this regard, it appears that TV Klan, although with shorter time length, often had a larger number of political stories, given that its news were shorter.

Among the newspapers and portals, the monitoring presents a situation in which newspapers have a higher percentage of political stories per issue, which is somewhat higher than the percentage of

the television and twice higher than the average percentage of the two portals. Below are the exact data:

**Table no.6. Number and percentage of political stories in newspapers and portals**

<b>Media</b>	<b>Average number of stories in one day</b>	<b>Average number of political stories in one day</b>	<b>% of political stories in one day</b>
Panorama	34.83	11.59	33.30%
Shqiptarja.com	40.8	17.9	41.90%
Balkanweb	132.16	29.8	22.40%
Albeu	177.7	24.1	13.55%

*Source: Monitoring conducted in the context of this research study*

Certainly, it would be very natural for the majority of political news to be very high, if the media outlets were to have a political profile. But all six of the outlets monitored as part of this research study have a generalist character and, in this context, we may say that there is high presence of political news, especially in the newspapers and televisions.

Besides the high presence of political news, Albanian media feature also an increasing opinionization, especially with regard to opinions about politics. Thus, while ten years ago, televisions had only 4 talk shows of a political nature, at present the majority of television stations have one such. It is also not so rare for politics to be present even in entertainment shows. Besides national televisions, now one finds opinion-based shows in the majority of televisions. The all-news stations as well as part of local televisions now have programs based on opinion. This is explained by the fact that such a category of programs may serve better than others for building bridges between

media and politics as well as to exert pressure or to make favors to it by processing opinion according to the interests of certain political forces. In the words of an opinion maker, these shows have turned into “indispensable windows for politics, where you need to appear in order to exist.”<sup>26</sup>

Opinion makers today represent a well-paid caste of the media, with incomes tens of times higher than those of reporters. Some of them also on the list of Albanian billionaires, becoming such even without owning their own businesses. This situation has been discussed several times in the media as well.<sup>27</sup>

A spectacular indicator of the increased power of opinion makers and “opinion-based programs” was the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary ceremony for the Opinion show of Blendi Fevziu, which took place in one of the main squares of the capital city, accompanied with a lot of fanfare and pomposity, and where all VIPs controlling Albanian politics and public opinion were present. As an analyst writes about this event, Fevziu managed to put in line the entire “elite” of our Albanian village, as people needing his media window.<sup>28</sup>

Besides opinionization coming from the television window, in recent years, we notice also an increased opinionization coming from the online media system. Portals, blogs and social media of the opinion-based profile have increased in recent years at a very high pace. From the television screens, opinionists have moved to the online environment in a feverish race to attract as many visitors as possible. Many controversial analysts who have been in the shadows or who have not found space in traditional media have appeared in this battlefield. An observation of the online environment by the

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26. <http://konika.al/2017/09/kur-driten-duhet-ta-jape-dikush-qe-nuk-e-ka/>

27. <http://www.newsbomb.al/article-65564>

28. <http://www.360grade.al/me-shume/editorial/item/94901-bravo-fevzo>



author shows that in this environment, Albanian opinion makers appear even more aggressive than in television or in newspapers, also due to the fact that they make their own portal's editorial policy. Language in cyberspace appears even more conflict-driven and those few scruples that opinion-makers preserve on television appear to fall.

Both opinion talk shows on TV and opinion-based web portals, among others, have increased considerably the intensity of “bombarding” the public with politics. As a result, instead of mediatizing political culture among Albanians, the media is mediatizing political conflict. The media is also contributing to building a society of opinion and hot reasoning instead of building a society of information and cold reason.

The increasing opinionization of the media has led to a weakening and reduction of fact-based journalism, creating fertile ground for opinion-based journalism and for *fake news*. This makes it even more urgent the need for the media to reflect and return to basic standards and the public mission before it is too late.

## **Executive summary**

This research takes upon itself to shed light upon the relations between the media and politics in Albania, starting from the historical and social context of these relations to continue with current prevailing trends that shape the typology of these relations. In order to also achieve conclusions with regard to the reporting of politics in the media, we have also undertaken a quantitative monitoring.

The transition of Albanian media toward free and independent media has been part and a reflection of the overall political-social transition of the country after the fall of communism and the establishment

of political pluralism. At the start of the 1990s, pluralistic media emerged and developed more under the encouragement of political demand and only later they began to develop also as a result of social demand and market demand. The first media outlets in transitioning Albania were founded by political parties. During this period, Albanian media tried to emancipate itself but it did not succeed to transform itself from a party institution to an independent institution. Only after 1994, media outlets owned by journalists, inclined to detach themselves from the influence of political parties and to stage strong opposition to power, began to emerge. After 1998, under the influence of market demand, many representatives of large businesses entered the field of media ownership, thus marking the emergence of clientelistic media outlets; many of these owners created their media outlets to serve business interests and to strengthen their ties with politics in exchange for mutual interests.

Following this long and winding transition, at present the Albanian media system appears relatively consolidated and, in many directions, displays similarity also with media systems in part of the western countries. According to analysis of this research of the three models presented by authors Hallin and Mancini, the model of Albanian media is more like the Politicized Pluralistic Model.

During the transition years, Albania saw the establishment of a relatively complete legal framework for the protection and development of media freedom and independence. However, in many cases, the legal framework was delayed or a mechanical transplant of western legislation. Enforcement of legislation remains a problem.

In the framework of relations between the media and politics, both in the early transition phases and during recent years, there have been frequent efforts of political formations to ensure in a way control

over the media through law as in the case of the Press Law or the case of legislation establishing the regulations for the election of the Steering Council of RTSH and AMA, which gives the opportunity to the political majority to decide on the composition of the steering bodies of these two institutions.

In terms of transparency over media ownership, Albania has made progress, but the concern is raised regarding the possibility of hidden ownership. Besides the ownership factor, their funding also has played a considerable role in the degree of dependence or independence of the media. In this regard, for many domestic analysts or international rapporteurs, the situation remains alarming. The EU Progress Report on Albania notes that media financing remains very problematic. There is almost no transparency and funding sources are manipulated or hidden.

Similar to countries of the polarized pluralistic media model, in Albania too, professional organizations and the trade unions of journalists are generally weak. An indicator of the lack of organization of the media and the journalists' community is also the fact that Albania, for a long period during the transition years, has not managed to have a Media Council, which exists in the majority of the region's countries. The inexistence or poor role of journalists' associations has led to a poor level of self-regulation of media in the country.

With regard to editorial autonomy, one can hardly find media owners who do not influence the editorial policy of the media outlets they own. Completely ignoring the media's public function, media owners in Albania treat information as private property and not a publicly shared asset. As a continuation of the submission of media to their interests, owners and leading officials (who are often on the same side) build fictive employment relations with journalists in

order to find it easier to dismiss them if the latter do not obey.

Poor implementation of the labor code, both for those working full-time and those working part-time remains a very disturbing issue. Many journalists work without employment contracts or have such contracts that may be arbitrarily interrupted. This has led to a situation in which many journalists submit to the owners' interests and carry out their agendas, often exerting self-censorship in their work. Pressure and lack of economic security have decreased journalists' independence and, as a result, have influenced the decline in professional standards and bias in reporting.

Furthermore, recent years have seen an increased mediatization of politics, displayed in the increase of media channels used by political parties and politicians and in the increased time or space reserved for politics in the mass communication means. Besides the process of mediatization of politics, we have seen a change in the conduct and rapport of media actors, especially owners, toward politics in general and government in particular, leading to a reconfiguration of the media approach to political sides and, in some cases, a change of their editorial policy.

The developments of the last four years indicate that we have arrived at a situation in which almost all the important media outlets, with rare exceptions, have lined up more or less on the side of power, thus harming their public mission in the name of business interests and increasingly abandoning the position the "fourth estate." There are authors who see a kind of "Putinization of media" in this this situation.

Although evidences of direct government pressure on media to change their editorial policy are not reported, apparently the mentioned changes may have been in exchange for favors for the

different businesses of the owners through a hidden clientelistic practice that occurs behind the scenes in relations between media owners and politics.

One of the characteristics of Albanian media is their high polarization and politicization. The merge of interests of powerful businesses, politics and media has not allowed the development of independent news entities. The majority of media outlets are seen as taking the side of the SP or DP.

In recent times, it appears that polarization is assuming new forms. There is a shift from the rightwing vs. leftwing media polarization to government vs. opposition media. Also, many media outlets, including some of the main ones recently have abandoned political loyalty and are moving from a “honey moon” with the DP government to a “honey moon” with the SP government, adjusting their editorial course and policy with the course and policy of the political winner, simply and only to protect and advance their business interests. This development is naturally graver and more consequential than constant and sustainable political polarization and parallelism and leads to a serious compromise of the role of the media and to devastation and elimination of public confidence in it.

This situation of media submission to the interests of business and politics has been exploited by the latter to increase the level of their instrumentalization for its own needs and goals, using particularly public relations channels. Research in the context of this study provides data that point to a high presence of news that simply “transcribe” PR office content. Political PR-based news are found in highest percentage in television compared to the press and online media.

Drastic developments have been seen recently also with regard to “ready tapes.” From a phenomenon and problem of electoral

campaign periods, “ready tapes” are now a permanent phenomenon and problem. In the Albanian context, more than a mediatization of politics, “ready tapes” represent an instrumentalization of media by the PR offices of politics or state institutions, harming considerably their independence and integrity.

With the massive spread of the internet and online communication, Politics 2.0 has expanded increasingly in Albania. This means the use of interactive online channels for political communication. The internet creates the possibility for political actors to enter into direct communication with audiences without the need for the mediation of traditional media. The latest and most sensational development in Albanian politics 2.0 was the opening in March 2017 of ERTV, a kind of web TV that carries the initials of the PM and SP chairman Edi Rama.

Another way that challenges the mediation of traditional media is the replacement of press statements of politicians with statuses on individual or institutional profiles on Facebook or Twitter. The number of stories generated based on these statuses is on the rise, thus marking a kind of Facebook-ization of political reporting.

The submissive position of Albanian traditional media to politics and the security gained through the capacities of cyber-politics has encouraged, time after time, a populist discourse in the political communication of the Albanian Prime Minister, who is also the head of the SP. Also, the above circumstances have encouraged the Albanian PM to throw the duel glove to media, declaring “open war” on them – a communication strategy also used by American President Donald Trump or other current global political leaders, especially for electoral effects.

Naturally, the challenge to the media, circumventing or ignoring it and the “attack” for electoral purposes might produce momentary

benefits for politics. Yet, from a long-term point of view, it cultivates a negative perception and a denying spirit for the media and journalists without distinction, leaving the public to be, on the one hand, prey to the increased number of *fake news* and manipulated social network information and, on the other, prey of the discourse of populist politicians, which may produce a new authoritarianism with consequences for democracy.

Through the increase of time or space of the media filled with political content, the media has contributed to a kind of “bombardment” of the public with politics. Thus, it has become almost normal for the country’s television stations, particularly the all-news stations, to broadcast *live* for hours in a row all the main political events as well as events that may not have had much public interest.

Besides *live* broadcasts, we notice an increased presence of political news in television news editions or newspaper pages or portals. Certainly, it would be natural for the percentage of political news to be very high if the media outlets were of a political profile, but all six media outlets monitored in the context of this research study have a generalist character and, in this regard, we may say that there is a high presence of political news, especially in newspapers and televisions.

Besides the high level of presence of political news, Albanian media have also featured increasing opinionization, especially with regard to opinions about politics. Thus, while ten years ago, televisions had only 4 talk shows of a political nature, at present the majority of television stations have one such. This category has served to build bridges between media and politics as well as to exert pressure or to make favors to it by processing opinion according to the interests of certain political forces. In the words of an opinionist, these shows have turned into “an indispensable window for politics, where you

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Besides opinionization coming from the television window, in recent years, we notice also an increased opinionization coming from the online media system. Portals, blogs and social media of the opinion-based profile have increased in recent years at a very high pace. Both opinion shows on TV and opinion-based portals on the web, among others, have increased considerably the intensity of the “bombardment” of the public with politics. As a result, instead of mediatizing political culture among Albanians, the media is mediatizing political conflict even more. Thus the media is contributing to building a society of opinion and hot reasoning instead of a society of information and cold reasoning.

The increasing opinionization of media has led to a weakening and reduction of fact-based journalism, creating fertile ground for opinion-based journalism and for *fake news*. This makes it even more urgent the need for the media to reflect and respect basic standards, through the sensitization of all actors of the field and the undertaking of initiatives that contribute to the return of the media to their functioning of public responsibility.



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