

EXAMINING MEDIA FREEDOM IN ALBANIA: A CRITICAL REFLECTION

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Abstract

This paper delves into the critical media freedom situation in Albania. Acknowledged now as the fourth pillar of democracy, media not only is crucial in informing the citizens but also acts as a watchdog by holding the authorities in power accountable and protecting democratic principles. Despite the several obstacles that media has faced in Albania dating back to the Ottoman era and exacerbated by the communist regime that lasted for almost half a century, the Albanian media started to flourish during the transition era, nevertheless facing persistent challenges when it came to media freedom. Through qualitative and quantitative data, this paper examines the contemporary state of media in Albania by emphasizing its effect on the country's democracy. While a robust legal and institutional framework for media freedom exists, its implementation in the case of Albania remains deficient, and that has resulted in numerous violations throughout the years. The widespread cases of self-censorship among journalists coupled with the political and economic interest of media owners, have further exacerbated the issue. The attempts made by the Albanian government to control media outlets with new laws and institutions have been scrutinized by international bodies as well. Overall, the aim of this research is not only to merely analyze the state of media freedom in Albania but also to bring more attention to this urgent situation which is threatening democratic principles in the country.

Keywords: *Media freedom, democracy, Albania, censorship, political influence.*

Introduction

The important role of media has been established in literature by many scholars. It is widely accepted that the media is not simply a tool for gaining information but also a crucial factor that affects the state of democracy in a country. Its role is considered so important that media has been established as the fourth pillar of democracy. A robust and independent media is crucial for informing the citizens to make sound political decisions in a democratic state. Furthermore, the media serves as a watchdog by exposing cases of corruption and keeping the ones in power accountable. However, a media that is captured by the influence of politics and business plays the opposite role by twisting the narrative and spreading propaganda. The purpose of this paper is to explore the situation of media freedom in the context of Albania. The media landscape in Albania has gone through many obstacles throughout the years, culminating in the period of the communist regime, where media was under the total control of the party and every information outside what the regime provided was censored. After the fall of the regime, media started to flourish, with hundreds of new private media channels operating in the market. However, even though media pluralism is present in today's Albania, media freedom remains problematic. The first part of this paper will include the literature review where the link between media freedom and democracy will be explored through the findings of other scholars. This will be followed by a brief history of media in Albania to set up the context for the cases that will be used for the main findings. This research will combine both quantitative and qualitative data, with a focus on some of the main cases of media freedom violations in recent years, to shed more light on the current state of media in Albania. The findings of this paper will reveal how and to what extent the media situation in Albania is affecting the democratic principles in the country as well as the political landscape.

Media's role in democracy

It is difficult to come up with one definitive definition of democracy as many scholars have different ways of explaining what democracy is. In simple terms, however, democracy can be defined as the "rule of the people." In a democratic system, the people are the ones who decide directly or indirectly about the leadership, laws, and policies of a country. Throughout the world and history, many different types of democratic regimes have existed starting from direct democracy in ancient Athens to today's modern concept of liberal democracy. A crucial characteristic of the latter is the separation of powers into branches to provide a checks and balance system so that none of the branches gains too much power over the others.

Along with the legislative, executive, and judiciary, media is considered the fourth pillar of democracy (Chawla, 2020). Media is a broad concept that

consists of a wide range of platforms and content. When we think of media, what comes mostly to our minds are the old traditional forms of media such as radio, TV, and newspaper, however with modernization, new forms of media have emerged such as digital and social media. These new forms of accessing information have had an important effect on media consumption and the political landscape. Nevertheless, all forms of media have one thing in common: they play a crucial role in maintaining democracy. First and foremost, the media serves as the main source of political information for the public which is crucial for making good political decisions under democratic rule. For citizens to be active in the political life of a country, means of communication and spreading information are crucial in debating and discussing the type of government they want for themselves (Bratton, 1994). As such, the media serves as a bridge between the political elites and the public. According to Norris (2000), there is a positive association between the use of news media and social mobilization, trust and political knowledge. Furthermore, in a democratic system, the media has the important role of a “watchdog” by holding politicians accountable and exposing corruption along with other wrongdoings. After all, it is a characteristic of authoritarian regimes to control and censor mass media, so it becomes obvious that the health of democracies is very dependent on free and impartial media (Baker, 2006). Some academics refer to the media as “specific actors opposing power agencies on behalf of the public.” This is true however only if the media is free from government influence, as in such cases it might play the complete opposite role.

Media plays a major role in politics, particularly because of its power of agenda setting. As famously said by McCombs and Shaw in 1972, “the media doesn’t tell people what to think, but rather what to think about.” Media has been used for decades as a tool to direct the attention of its consumers towards a certain topic and distract them from other ones. This is what is called the agenda-setting theory of media.

In the book *Four Theories of the Press* (Siebert et al., 1956), there is a clear theoretical categorization of the types of media as linked to the regime in which they exist. Firstly, there is the Soviet-Communist theory of media in which the state owns and controls the press directly. The role of the media in this case is to serve as a tool of the ruling party to bring change. Furthermore, under this system, the media tends to report less negatively about the regime, while criticizing democracies. The second theory is that of the Authoritarian media system. Although it has similarities to the Soviet-Communist theory, the main difference is that in this type of system, the media can be privately or publicly owned. Additionally, in the Authoritarian media system, media is used more to maintain the status quo rather than to bring change. The third theory of media is the Libertarian one. It describes societies where the media has unrestrained freedom and no government intervention. Under this theory, the main role of the media is to act as a ‘watchdog’ by keeping the state powers in check. Lastly, the fourth theory is the Social-responsibility theory which highlights the

importance of media professionalism and code of conduct. This theory does not make the assumption that anyone can use the media like the Libertarians, instead, they argue for the importance of professionals.

Having an independent media is crucial in a democratic country as it has the power to pressure the government and support the causes of civil society, therefore protecting democracy. According to Biswas, political involvement is the main goal of media (Limpitlaw, 2012). Media serves as a tool that gives a voice to the people by increasing representation and improving the level of democracy (Mwengenmeir, 2014). The free flow of information and the exchange of ideas is beneficial in democracy as it improves the efficiency of decision-making by simultaneously increasing transparency and accountability (Zuboff, 2019). An independent media also provides checks and balances for the other pillars of democracy, namely for the legislative, executive and judiciary.

It then becomes apparent that the level of media freedom in a society is a clear indicator of its democracy consolidation and well-functioning. Its importance is also highlighted in The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948. As stated in Article 19, everyone has the right to freedom of expression and to receive information from media regardless of frontiers. When it comes to democracy, media freedom is one of the indicators used to measure the level of democracy in a given country. Here we can mention, for example, the Freedom House which gives yearly reports about the levels of democracy and liberty in countries all around the world and uses freedom of media as an important indicator of democracy in a country (Freedom House, 2024). According to a study conducted by Becker and Karlekar (2014), there is a clear correlation between media freedom and the level of democracy in a country. By using data from the Freedom House reports, it was found that countries with a higher level of media freedom also have a higher level of democracy. It is difficult to say which one affects the other, however, the correlation is very clear. They both have an interdependency path.

Paying attention to the transparency and independence of media is paramount in preventing political propaganda and authoritarian tendencies in a country. Propaganda is defined as the dissemination of information and facts to influence public opinion, mainly through the usage of mass media (Smith, 2024). According to Lasswell (1927), propaganda is 'the management of collective attitudes by the manipulation of significant symbols. Although propaganda has existed for thousands of years, it has been only during the last 100 years, with the invention of new technologies, that spreading political propaganda has been successful in affecting whole nations. Usage of propaganda is seen in times of war, or if we recall the authoritarian regimes of the 20th century, however, it remains alive and well even in modern and democratic societies. Here we can simply recall the usage of commercials during election times or the biased news coverage. Modern propaganda is a

powerful and dangerous tool since everyone is so susceptible to it and it often goes unnoticed (Manzaria & Bruck, n.d).

According to McChesney's book *Rich Media, Poor Democracy* (1999), media in the United States, but also around the world, is going into a crisis. Because of commercialism, media is losing its power as a "watchdog" and that in turn has allowed policymakers to implement anti-democratic communication policies. Media has turned into a highly concentrated corporation in which only a handful of players own the vast majority of media outlets. McChesney gives the example of "Clear Channel Communication" which owns 900 radio stations and 19 TV stations in the U.S. along with shares in several international broadcasting channels. Because of this, the media oligarchy news coverage is changing from covering important issues that directly affect the public to instead covering the advertisement of sponsors.

Media in Albania: Historical context

In her extensive book *Albanian Media: The Difficult Journey to Freedom* (2021), Luljeta Progni studied the media situation in Albania throughout history. The journey has been indeed difficult for Albanians, starting since the period of the Ottoman occupation, when publishing an Albanian newspaper was seen as nearly impossible. Whereas other countries had already established robust media and state institutions, the first attempts to create an Albania media were done without having an independent state or even a school in the Albanian language. The absence of proper infrastructure or any other means of communication made exchanging information a difficult task. Many Albanian patriots contributed with their own money to publish about the history of Albania to escape the Ottoman assimilation. That was done at a time when the Albanian language was not yet standardized, resulting in the first published works using Slavic, Latin, or even Greek letters. It was only in 1882 when the first newspaper in the Albanian language, "Zeri i Shqiperisë" (The Voice of Albania) was published by the Albanian minority in Greece. In late 19th century, media served as an important contributor to the independence movement, which was eventually achieved in 1912. Between the period of 1900-1912, more than 25 newspapers and magazines were published, the majority by intellectuals outside the country.

According to Progni, the 30s, which comprised the period of Albanian monarchy, marked the glorious period of Albanian journalism, as media publication flourished by involving the elite of educated and intellectual Albanians. Nevertheless, censorship was still present. Criticism against King Zog was prohibited as well as supporting political oppositions. Several newspapers that were published outside the country were not allowed to be distributed in Albania. Many publishers tried to escape censorship by using more careful and moderate language towards the monarchy. According to the

law on media of 1931, every publisher ought to be over 25 years of age, had to have a high school degree, and a deposit of 5000 gold francs. These were conditions which not everyone could fulfill at the time, which led to the closing down of many newspapers.

The situation of media freedom in Albania hit rock bottom in 1944 with the establishment of the communist regime. One of the first decisions that were taken by this authoritarian regime was banning all the newspapers published in major cities such as Tirana, Shkodra, and Korça. Albanian newspapers and magazines published outside the country were also prohibited. Since November 1944, the right to own private media no longer existed (Boriçi & Marku, 2010). Many intellectuals were killed or imprisoned, including here also journalists and individuals who contributed to Albanian independence, who were labeled as “enemies of the people.” The media was in total control of the Labor Party and turned into nothing more than a propaganda machine. Media freedom did not exist as a concept and the people couldn't get information outside what the regime provided. Professional journalists were now replaced by militants of the regime. Every morning, it was compulsory for the workers to listen to the reading of newspapers such as “Zëri i Popullit” (The Voice of the People) or “Bashkimi” (The Union). Refusing to subscribe to such newspapers had consequences, even imprisonment. The “Agitation and Propaganda” sector eventually turned into the most important structure of the communist party by being present in all areas of life, including the media (Progni, 2021).

The fall of the communist regime marked also the end of the media monopolization by the government. After 1991, media started to flourish with hundreds of new media outlets. Also, freedom of media was now guaranteed by law (Voko & Likmeta, 2015). In January 1991, the first opposition newspaper was published: “Rilindja Demokratike” (Democratic Revival), established by the Democratic Party of Albania. TV media channels also started booming, with “Shijak TV” being the first private broadcaster. The institutional and legal framework for media was also established, albeit problematic in some areas. The law on the press of 1993 was considered by the media community as inadequate and even oppressive (MOM, 2023). Several laws and amendments regarding media were established in the following decade. Nevertheless, problems regarding media freedom persisted. This shouldn't come as a surprise: after 45 years of isolation and censorship, Albanians still are not accustomed to democratic norms and values regarding the importance of media freedom.

Current issues related to media freedom

With the fall of the communist regime, the media environment in Albania started to flourish. After years of total censorship, a great number of media outlets started to appear in the market. In precise terms, the number of

traditional media in Albania is considered quite high in comparison to the market size of the country (IDRA, 2019). Currently, there are four national TV broadcasters, one public and three private. The total number of TV channels operating in Albania is 52 (AMA, 2024).

Freedom of media has been enshrined in the Albanian Constitution since 1998. Article 22 guarantees freedom of expression, freedom of press, radio, and television and prohibits media censorship. Albania is also part of several International Conventions for the protection of civil and political rights based on Albania's membership in the United Nations and Council of Europe. Besides the constitution and international treaties, media freedom is also guaranteed by Law no. 97/2013 "On audio and audio-visual media services in the Republic of Albania." The aim of passing this law in 2013 was to harmonize the Albanian legislation with the EU directives on audiovisual media. Media freedom and, in particular, freedom of expression, is a very important condition that Albania ought to fulfill for its European Union membership, as mentioned in Article 102 of the Stabilization Association Agreement on "Cooperation in the audio-visual" in 2009. Lastly, in addition to the legal framework, the institutional framework consists of the governmental agencies in mass media, namely the Albanian Telegraphic Agency (ATA); Audiovisual Media Authority (AMA); Electronic and Postal Communications Authority, and the Official Publishing Center.

Despite several attempts to improve the legal and institutional efforts regarding the media market, this sector continues to be dominated by ownership concentration and informality. The legal vacuum since the early years of the creation of private media channels continues to affect the lack of improvement in the media environment. Other factors include the close ties between media owners and politics as well as the weak and largely ineffective regulatory authority (Bushati & Bregu, 2023). According to a 2021 report by the Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom (CMPF), the media sector in Albania suffers from a lack of marked plurality, undisclosed ownership, political dependence and lack of consultation with the media actors in regard to changes in legislation (Voko & Limeta, 2022).

Even though Albania does not lack the proper legal or institutional frameworks, it lacks effective implementation, as the media freedom situation in Albania remains a considerable challenge for the country. In fact, according to the Global Right to Information Rating, Albania has one of the world's top 10 best legal frameworks for accessing information. Practical implementation, however, paints a different picture. As stated by Reporters Without Borders, in 2022, media freedom in Albania was at an "all-time low," going down 20 places in one year only, ranking 103 out of 180 (Taylor, 2022). The situation did not improve even during the following year, when Albania scored last in Western Balkans and second-last in Europe in regards to media freedom (RSF, 2024). This sharp drop has come as a result of many cases of gross media freedom violations and attempts made by the Albanian government to limit the role of

media. As mentioned by Media Ownership Monitor (2023), political control over media outlets is rated as high. Here we can mention the appointment of the chair of the Audiovisual Media Authority, Armela Krasniqi, a former spokesperson of the Socialist Party, which is the current party in power. This 2021 decision was also criticized by various international media rights organizations by raising questions about AMA's political independence (MOM, 2023).

Except for the public broadcaster RTSH, all the media outlets are privately owned. According to Media Ownership Monitor (2023), most media outlets are owned by a handful of powerful families and businessmen. The concentration of broadcast media audience is considerably high: only four families, namely Hoxha with Top Media, Frangaj with Klan Media, Dulaku with Media Vizion, and Hysebelliu with News 23, have 86.9% of the audience. According to studies by the Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom (CMPF), when the top four owners control over 50% of the media market, media ownership concentration is at high risk (Brogi, Nenadic, Parcu, Viola, & Cunha, 2018). Many of the influential media owners in Albania have businesses in heavily regulated fields such as banking, construction, public procurement, etc., which makes them very susceptible to pressure from the political elites which, in turn, influences the news coverage.

An example that shows both the legal vacuum regarding audiovisual media and the ownership concentration is that of the digitalization process. The aim of the digitalization process was to increase diversity and media pluralism by increasing the access of users compared to the previous analog system. However, since the process started, many concerns started to become evident, including media monopolies and the overall worsening of the broadcasting landscape. Therefore, a new law, Law No. 9742, dated 28.05.2007, "On Digital Broadcasting in the Republic of Albania" was introduced. Its aim was to ensure media pluralism by limiting a legal entity to owning only one terrestrial digital network (Londo, 2012). However, the law failed to have proper enforcement, leaving the media market largely unregulated. This led to a near-monopoly situation with Digit-Alb and the public broadcaster dominating the market.

In 2012, the Albanian government approved the "Strategy for Transitioning from Analog to Digital Broadcasting" (Vrioni, 2018). The need for a new media law became clear. Therefore, the current media law was passed by the Albanian Parliament in 2013. This new law introduced a "beauty contest" procedure for licensing digital networks as stipulated by Article 139 of Law No. 97/2013, and regulated by AMA Decision No. 10, dated 02.07.2013. The criteria for licensing according to this regulation were based on legal, technical and financial standards (AMA, 2013). However, the major operators such as Top Channel and Digit-Alb, opposed this process by requesting a review by the Parliament. That request was beyond the jurisdiction of the Audiovisual Media Authority, which led to some filing lawsuits against AMA's decisions. In a controversial decision (no. 80-2016-1028) by the Administrative Court of First

Instance of Tirana in 2016, national broadcasting licenses were granted to Digit-Alb, TV Klan, and Top Channel.

Additionally, the licensing process during that period highlighted AMA's failure to comply with Article 62 of the 2013 law which aims to prevent monopolies and ensure media pluralism. The Article stipulates that no natural or legal person, local or foreign, could own more than 40% of the total capital of the joint-stock company that holds a national license. A person who holds shares in a company that has a national license cannot own more than 20% of the total capital in a second company that has a national license (Bushati & Bregu, 2023). There were even attempts to repeal this Article which was faced with criticism by OSCE and the European Union (Zguri, 2017). As a result, the licensing process further increased media ownership concentration by threatening pluralism and democratic values.

As previously highlighted in the literature, even in the case of Albania, we can see the correlation between the level of democracy and the level of media freedom. The 2022 Freedom House Report provides clear insights into this correlation. According to the report, Albania scored 3.7 out of 7 in its democracy score, classifying it as a hybrid regime, which indicates a political environment characterized by a mixture of democratic and authoritarian elements. When it came to independent media, Albania scored 3.5 out of 7, illustrating the current media landscape in the country, along with the challenges that media is facing. This data once again reflects the broader pattern observed globally regarding democracy and media freedom.

The latest EU Commission report of 2023 on Albania, was critical towards the freedom of expression and the current media situation. Freedom of expression falls under the "Judiciary and Fundamental Rights" chapter, which is part of the "Fundamentals of Accession Process" cluster. As such, guaranteeing media freedom is crucial in the EU integration process, with the European Commission labeling the role of information as a public good, by stating that media companies cannot be treated as any other business. As a result, many European countries have established anti-monopoly rules to address the issue of ownership concentration. An important initiative is the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA) which sets rules for the transparency of media ownership and independent journalism (Borges & Carlini, 2022). EMFA entered into force in May 2024 and the rules will fully apply in 2025 (EU COM, n.d.). As a country that aspires EU membership, Albania needs to take measures and have the proper tools to comply with the EU requirements. As for now, the Commission has noted a moderate level of preparation in this area, with limited progress. Especially problematic was the political influence in the media, as well as the working conditions for journalists. There is also a concern about the concentration of media ownership and the transparency of financial resources. A similar pattern can also be seen in the previous EU Commission reports, as many recommendations have been largely ignored.

A significant problem regarding the freedom of media remains that of self-censorship among journalists. Because of the economic and political interests of media owners, many journalists resort to self-censorship to secure their jobs. In fact, according to a study done by the Albanian Helsinki Committee in 2020, 49.5% of media employees stated that they were asked to not publish certain news items. According to another survey conducted by Voko and Likmeta (2015), 75% of respondents stated that the main causes of self-censorship are the economic interest and the political links of the owner. Self-censorship continues to be a quite damaging phenomenon for Albanian society as it hinders investigations for crime or high-level corruption, therefore protecting the interest of the powerful elite.

Many factors have contributed to media pressure in Albania but one of the most influential ones remains to be the government. In fact, in a speech, Prime Minister Edi Rama described online media as harmful as pedophilia, Nazi propaganda and terrorism (Elezi, 2021). Many saw this as an attempt by Rama to justify the controversial and infamous anti-defamation package. This package consists of two draft laws regarding online media. In the first draft law, the Complaints Council would have the power to force online media to delete content, publish an apology and insert notifications if what they published has violated the provisions on dignity and privacy. Also, they are obliged to pay up to €8.300 if they violate these provisions. In the second draft law, the Electronic and Postal Communications Authority (AKEP) will have the power to insert pop-ups and, if websites don't comply, they have to pay a fine of up to €830,000. This package was a direct attempt by the government to censor online media and a flagrant violation of media freedom (Erebara, 2019). In recent years, online media, also referred to as news portals, has been flourishing in Albania with more than 900 news portals registered. It has been estimated that 69% of Albanians use online media every day as their main source of information (MOM, 2023). Since online media is more decentralized compared to mass media, the anti-defamation package was seen as an attempt by the government to control this branch of media. In 2020, the Venice Commission stated that this package is not up to international standards and the Commission is concerned regarding media censorship. This draft law was also scrutinized by the European Commission and the Council of Europe. Because of the international pressure and the controversy that this draft law caused, it was eventually withdrawn in 2022 (Taylor, 2022b).

However, this has not been the government's only attempt at media censorship.. A new state agency has been established in 2021: The Media and Information Agency (MIA). On the official MIA website, it is claimed that this new agency aims to "transparently communicate to the media and the public, the purpose, objectives, innovations or issues that are resolved through the acts of the Council of Ministers and other acts of the ministers and any institution of the state administration." The government claims that this new agency will increase transparency and serve the needs of the public and media, but many see it as a

“propaganda ministry.” According to the new rules, the ministry spokespersons are not allowed to talk to the media directly. All the information should first be approved by MIA’s director general, who is appointed directly by the Prime Minister. The role of the director general is almost equal to that of a minister. He can decide about spokespersons of each ministry, approve public appearances, and decide on the journalists who will be a part of press conferences (Article 19, 2021). The agency also releases media content which is then distributed and used by other media channels. The government has claimed that MIA is based on the German model, however, this was proved to be false by German journalists. Germany does have a government agency related to media, the Federal Press Office, however, its role bears little similarity to MIA. The German agency organizes press conferences in which journalists are invited to ask questions. Furthermore, the responsibility for choosing the spokespersons lies within each respective ministry and not under one individual as in the case of MIA (Taylor, 2022a).

Another case of media control is the case of “ERTV.” This is the Prime Minister’s media that creates pre-recorded videos to distribute them to other media channels. In this way, the information that is shared is controlled and that creates a shield to protect the PM from unwanted questions from journalists. The video content is given to only some selected journalists. The example of ERTV has been followed by other government institutions as well: instead of interacting with the media, many public officials send their pre-recorded videos to communicate with the public (Taylor, 2022).

In this environment, reporting cases of corruption and other wrongdoings, one of the main duties of media, has become difficult, if not impossible. This has contributed not only to low transparency and accountability from the government’s side but also to the negative perception that the public has regarding the media. According to a survey, 70% of respondents mentioned political clientelism, bias, and partisanship as the biggest problems of the media landscape in Albania, followed by the business interests of media owners (Zguri, 2019).

It is quite evident that media freedom in Albania is under serious threat. The government has found different ways to attack the media because it knows that it is a powerful political weapon. This control of information has made the job of journalists even harder because of the lack of access to information. Many questions from journalists are not answered and journalists are even insulted in many cases. In one famous instance, Prime Minister Edi Rama referred to journalists as “trash bins” (in Albanian “kazan”). Many other politicians often call journalists “bought or captured” which makes them a constant target of harassment (ECPMF, 2019). In 2022 two journalists were banned for three months from government conferences for ‘ethical violations’ (EU COM, 2023). This was even criticized by the European Federation of Journalists which saw the decision as an excuse to exclude journalists who ask difficult questions (EFJ, 2022).

According to Media Ownership Monitor, in the period between 2020-2023, 64 violations of media freedom towards journalists were registered, including physical abuse, harassment, threats, and smear campaigns. Another monitoring report by Media Freedom Rapid Response in 2023, recorded 23 violations in that year alone, which involved 45 journalists and media entities. Furthermore, in a survey conducted by the Albanian Helsinki Committee in 2020, it was found that 52% of journalists and media workers reported verbal threats and 34% physical threats. One of the most serious attacks against media in the past decade has been the case of Top Channel in 2023, where unidentified attackers opened fire, killing a security guard. In a public statement, Top Channel called the incident a terrorist attack that was aimed at limiting the freedom of speech and democracy (Top Channel, 2023). Another very recent example is that of the journalist Ambrozia Meta, who was attacked by Prime Minister Edi Rama after asking a question about an investment project on the environmentally protected island of Sazan (Women Press Freedom, 2024). The high number of threats to media channels and individual journalists and the lack of proper legal investigation have made the situation in recent years especially problematic.

The state of media freedom in Albania has had a detrimental effect on the democracy of the country. Almost every media channel has strong political affiliation leading to the politicization of free speech. The media has therefore become an unreliable source of information for the citizens, focused more on advertisement rather than transparent information, turning it from a publicly shared asset to simply a private property (Bogdani, 2018). When looking at the literature, it becomes clear that Albania resembles more the Authoritarian media theory, where there is a plurality of media, either publicly or privately owned, which mainly serve the ones in power. This has resulted in a biased media system in Albania, which goes completely against the democratic principles that the country claims to follow. This can also be observed in times of elections. According to the legal framework, the two biggest parties in Albania, the Socialist and the Democratic party, are supposed to have equal broadcasting time during the election period. This, however, has not always been the case. For instance, during the 2021 elections, the Socialist Party had half of the coverage while the Democratic Party had only 38% (Likmeta, 2021).

This erosion of media integrity is not just a political issue but a personal one for the citizens of Albania. When the media, the fourth pillar of democracy, becomes a tool for those in power, people are left without reliable information to make informed decisions. This imbalance, especially visible during elections, skews public perception and hinders the democratic process. As a result, Albanians find themselves in a landscape where their voices are muted, and their choices are constrained, highlighting a stark departure from the democratic ideals the country strives to uphold.

Conclusion

Media freedom is a fundamental right that if undermined has severe consequences for a society. As the fourth pillar of democracy, media plays an important role in informing the citizens and keeping the authorities accountable for their actions. This paper aims to explore the media situation in Albania and its effect on democracy and the overall political landscape. The Albanian media has struggled for decades, starting since the period of the Ottoman occupation and culminating with the total control and censorship of the communist regime in the 20th century. Even after the establishment of the democratic regime, media freedom remains a problematic area. This paper gathers both quantitative and qualitative data from various sources to get a better grasp of the situation of media in today's Albania. The legal and institutional framework in Albania is mostly in place. However, it is the implementation of that framework that is lacking. There have been many cases where media freedom is continuously violated. Because of the political and financial links of the media owners, many journalists resort to self-censorship which affects news coverage and prevents them from reporting cases of corruption and other wrongdoings. Journalists themselves often report cases of violence and threats, which in most instances are not investigated by the higher authorities. In addition to that, the political influence over media is strengthened by the fact that very few people own the majority of the media outlets operating currently in Albania. What is especially problematic is the attempts that the government has made to control the media, such as the case of the infamous anti-defamation package or the case of ERTV, among others.

Taking new measures to improve the media environment is crucial. There is an urgent need to have a clear and enforceable legal framework which would put limits to media ownership. This is one of the most important steps for Albania to take, in order to align its media laws with the European standard and specifically with the European Media Freedom Act. Another important aspect which needs improvement is media literacy among the citizens. The Albanian society must pay more attention to the flagrant attempts to silence the media and journalists as it directly affects the state of democracy and human rights in the country. This can be achieved through educational programs which aim to empower individuals to engage critically with media, demand accountability and support independent journalism. A practical approach would be to include media literacy programs in schools, as well as to conduct workshops and campaigns to raise awareness and help the public understand the importance of safeguarding media freedom. Overall, more future research is needed in this area of study to further fill the gaps and find new solutions regarding the complex situation of media freedom in Albania.

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