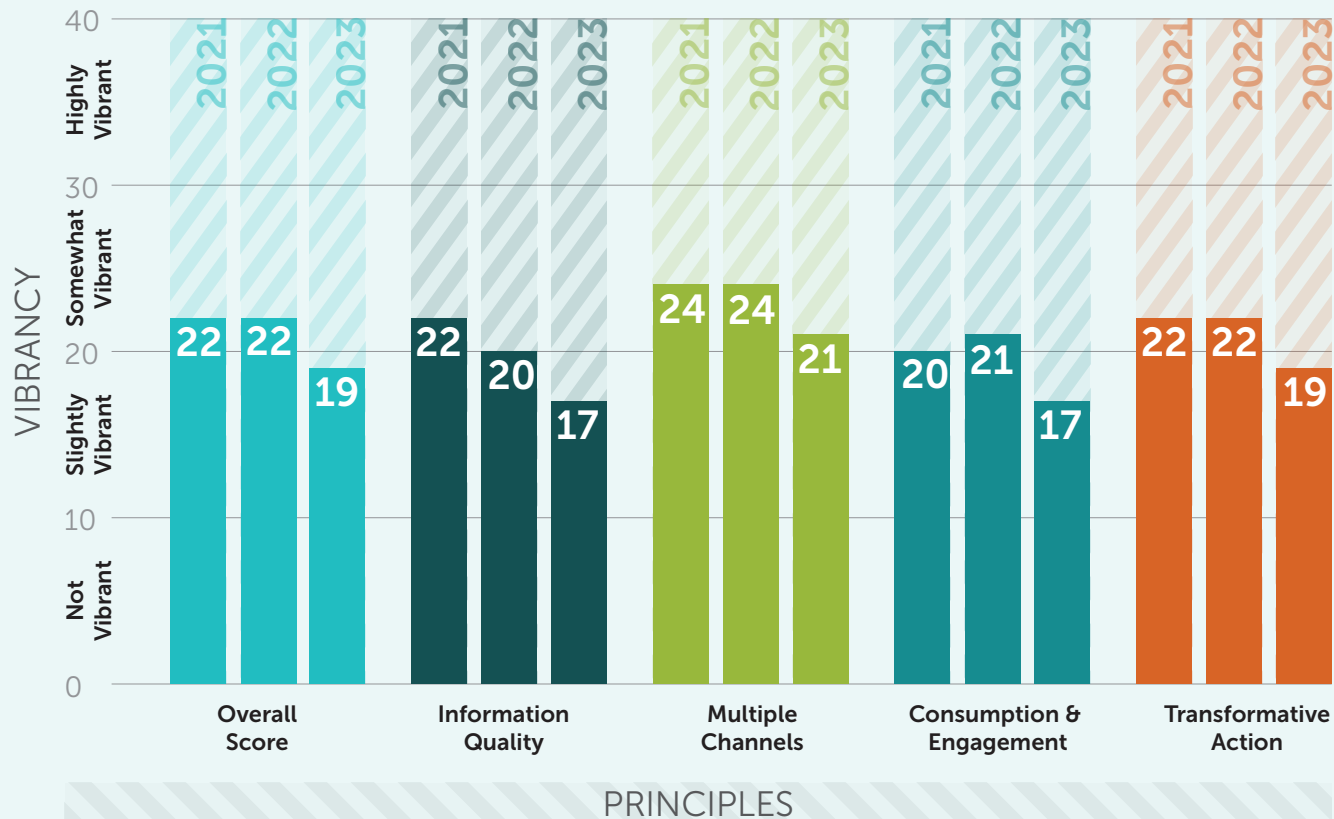


ALBANIA

Vibrant Information Barometer

2 0 2 3





Highly Vibrant (31-40): Quality information is widely available in this country. People have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information; they recognize and reject misinformation.

Somewhat Vibrant (21-30): Quality information is available in this country and most of it is editorially independent, based on facts, and not intended to harm. Most people have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information, although some do not. Most people recognize and reject misinformation, although some do not.

Slightly Vibrant (11-20): Quality information is available on a few topics or geographies in this country, but not all. While some information is editorially independent, there is still a significant amount of misinformation, malinformation, and hate speech in circulation, and it does influence public discourse. Most people do not recognize or reject misinformation.

Not Vibrant (0-10): Quality information is extremely limited in this country. The vast majority of it is not editorially independent, not based on facts, or it is intended to harm. People do not have the rights, means, or capacity to access a wide range of information; they do not recognize or reject misinformation; and they cannot or do not make choices on what types of information they want to engage with.

Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL
SCORE**19**

With a first intergovernmental conference in July which opened EU accession negotiations, 2022 marked an important moment in Albania's path towards EU integration. Structures are now in place to carry out accession negotiations and align national legislation with EU law.

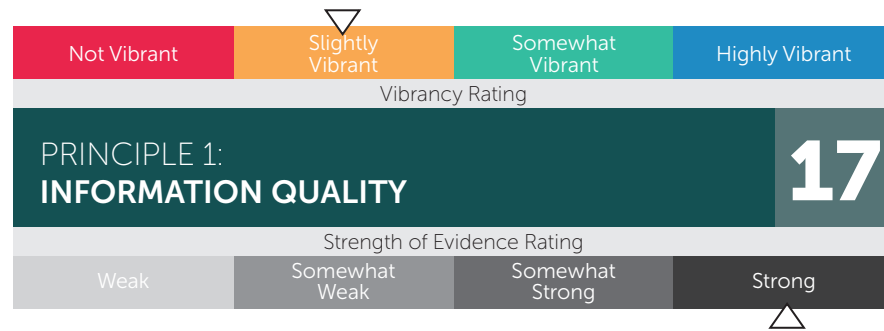
Other major events followed. The country faced economic challenges due to the war in Ukraine, including rising inflation and prices. Additionally, the election of Major General Bajram Begaj as Albania's new president in June 2022 instigated infighting within the main opposition party throughout the year.

A series of cyberattacks shook Albania's public and private IT infrastructure in 2022, disrupting e-service provision, taking down government websites, and exposing personal and classified information including mailboxes of the prime minister, ministers, embassies, police, and the State Intelligence Service, as well as account numbers, amounts, and other personal data of private bank account holders. The government declared that the cyberattacks were orchestrated and sponsored by the Islamic Republic of Iran and proceeded to sever diplomatic relations with the country in September. Albania restored services following the cyberattack swiftly, but the toll of the massive data leakages remains unclear.

Albania's media ecosystem is characterized by a rising number of information and news sources--but an overall decline quality, contributing to a decline in the country score from 22 in the 2022 VIBE study to 19 in this year's study. There was a three-point decline in panelist

scores for Principle 1 (Information Quality), driven by propaganda dominating content production, leaving less room for genuine news, while the political and economic interests of media owners and influence-buying skew the media landscape and undermine editorial independence. The VIBE panelists believed that the dim outlook for media financing is one of the most important hindrances to the country's media independence. They identified a strong need for financing independent investigative work, especially in local communities. Principle 2's scores (Multiple Channels) also saw a three-point decline compared with last year's study, with higher scores given to the indicator examining access to channels of information, but low scores for the indicator focused on the independence of information channels.

Principle 3 (Information Consumption and Engagement) and 4 (Transformative Action) scores dropped four and three points, respectively. While audiences tend to seek out information that confirms their beliefs and thus remain within their information bubbles, including on social media, there is limited availability of nonpartisan news sources. However, on a positive note, the panelists acknowledged Albania's progress in integrating media and information literacy into basic education and the accreditation of media education courses for pre-university teachers. The panelists credited international and civil society organizations' (CSOs) support for these initiatives and claimed that more initiatives to foster collaboration between media and CSOs in a sustainable manner could be beneficial to Albania's media development.



The Albanian media market presents a dichotomy between growth in the sheer number of outlets and sinking quality. Biased reporting and unverified facts are prevalent, revealing lapses in ethics. Panelists agreed that propaganda, which reaches outlets in the form of readymade materials, dominates the content stream. Some media outlets spread disinformation intentionally for political or clickbait purposes. However, the emergence of non-governmental organization (NGO) media adhering to ethical standards and conducting fact-checking marks a positive trend. Harmful content dissemination by foreign governments is limited, but Albania's own government has a history of poor relations with critical media. Hate speech is also an issue, with a few cases landing on the Commissioner for the Protection against Discrimination's desk in 2022.

Panelists awarded their highest scores to Indicator 4, on the inclusivity and diversity of the body of content — with the Albanian Radio and Television seen as the pinnacle of inclusive and diverse content production, catering to all audiences. Indicator 5, in contrast, scored the lowest in Principle 1, with panelists providing a gloomy outlook for the media's financial prospects—and noting that the lack of financial independence continues to hold back the development of media independence in the country. They saw NGO funding for independent

journalism as a positive development, allowing journalists to write without following a specific editorial agenda.

Indicator 1: There is quality information on a variety of topics available.

It is possible to find quality information on some topics in Albania, and panelists agreed that the underpinning infrastructure is adequate, especially considering growth in the mainstream and online media ecosystem. Such growth, however, is predominantly translated in quantitative, rather than qualitative, terms. Lutfi Dervishi, a media consultant and journalism lecturer at the University of Tirana, noted that the current infrastructure lags in technological developments such as using mobile journalism or fact checking. The panelists identified the need of support for ongoing training programs for journalists with an emphasis on technology, and technology-enabled reporting.

“It seems that ethics is the exception, not the rule, with efforts to twist the truth to serve ideological or business interests and a lack of transparency about editorial lines.”

The panelists made a distinction between the formal and informal training of journalists. Main universities offer journalism degrees, but degrees are increasingly being offered in journalism and public relations, further blurring the lines between the two fields and setting the stage for graduates to pursue more lucrative careers in public relations.

Moreover, the curricula, as panelists noted, are outdated, failing to keep up with developments—especially on the technology front. Shortcomings in relation to laboratories and equipment, especially in universities, reflect a failure to take advantage of technology in the formal education of new generations of journalists.

The panelists noted there are increasing opportunities for training for working journalists, mainly sponsored by international organizations. However, such trainings are less available in settings outside of the capital, Tirana.

The panelists expressed concern about the lack of an observed industry-

wide code of ethics in content production, with biased reporting, a tendency to regurgitate politicians' press releases, and a failure to verify facts on display in most media outlets. The situation is worst in online media, where articles sometimes leave out authors' names and are not fact-based. It seems that ethics is the exception, not the rule, with efforts to twist the truth to serve ideological or business interests and a lack of transparency about editorial lines. Major outlets are seen "changing sides" within very short periods of time.

However, the panelists highlighted the positive trend of an increasing number of media registered as NGOs, adhering to ethical standards, conducting fact-checking, and reporting on issues of public interest. The panelists also emphasized that journalists with the courage and skill to ask the right questions and hold government actors accountable do exist, but they are often pressured to self-censor and follow the editorial line by editors and owners.

In Albania, generally, there are no distinctions, or separation, between editorial policies or content and management. As a result, published content tends to follow owners' political and economic interests.

Local news is severely underreported. News pertaining to the central government and independent agencies in Tirana monopolizes about two-thirds of the media, with the rest following local developments.¹ Panelists agreed that politics dominates the news arena.

Indicator 2: The norm for information is that it is based on facts.

The panelists agreed that information in Albania is generally not based on facts, and propaganda is widespread. Propaganda-infused content – produced by central and local-level government officials and political parties – is served readymade to journalists. Outlets often broadcast

¹ *Local News Mapping Study*, Citizens Channel. November 16, 2022. <https://citizens-channel.com/2022/11/16/citizens-channel-prezanton-studimin-hartezimi-i-lajmeve-lokale/>

“The panelists agreed that information in Albania is generally not based on facts, and propaganda is widespread.”

and publish this material with little to no fact-checking. Some media intentionally spread disinformation to serve certain political agendas; others knowingly spread disinformation for click-bait. The panelists also noted credible reports documenting cases of senior media representatives blackmailing businesses by threatening unfavorable media coverage such as “*Country Reports on Human Rights Practices on Albania*” by the U.S. Department of State, from 2022.

As Kristina Voko, executive director of BIRN Albania, noted, a lot of false information is not fabricated internally by outlets, but the copy-paste culture of many Albanian newsrooms perpetuates the spread of propaganda and disinformation. Journalists do not suffer professional

consequences for spreading fake news unless they speak against the government.

Panelists critiqued the government's reaction to the 2022 cyberattacks as well, agreeing that the government failed to communicate responsibly and clearly after news of the hacking circulated in the media.

Ornela Liperi, editor-in-chief of *Monitor* magazine which specializes in financial issues, noted that open data exists to facilitate fact-checking, such as treasury transactions. This pool of data has improved continuously, aided also by technological developments. Journalists encounter obstacles, however, when requesting unpublished information, which impedes fact-checking.

Content moderation remains an issue, especially considering the small size of the Albanian market. Apart from Facebook's effort to collaborate with Faktoje.al, the first fact-checking service in Albania, attempts to interrupt the flow false information on social media remain poor.

Indicator 3: The norm for information is that it is not intended to harm.

Dissemination of intentionally harmful content by foreign governments

is not considered a major problem. Rather than focusing on mal-information, they tend to focus on propaganda, promotion of historical connections, or disinformation.

Jetmira Kaci, a freelance journalist based in Tirana, noted that the government, however, does not inform, but rather disseminates what it wants the public to know, mainly through pre-packaged videos. Press conferences are rare, and officials treat journalists disparagingly, addressing them with offensive and derogatory language – thus limiting space and opportunities for critical questions.

The misinterpretation of facts is an important issue, with panelists citing examples like the war in Ukraine and its impact on prices. Misinterpretation, rather than mal-information, dominates the government’s narrative. Voko noted that in two cases the prime minister, when confronted with dissemination of disinformation, apologized².

Professional content producers and pundits seem to use hate speech, especially towards vulnerable groups, women, the Roma, and Egyptian communities, along with LGBTQ+ communities, according to the panelists. Yet reporting of hate speech remains low. In 2022, the Commissioner for the Protection against Discrimination reviewed only six cases (four complaints and two *ex officio* cases brought by the commissioner flagging the use of hate speech by television show guests – including one who is a public figure – against a woman and a member of the Roma minority). In the second case, the Commissioner found the television station responsible for hate speech as well, given the failure to take a critical stance against hate speech.³

Mal-information has been noted in cases that relate to issues protested by civil society, an area in which the government has been quite vested. Attacks against journalists and critical media continue. Voko also emphasized that many outlets that disseminate mal-information want to harm certain politicians—or create a positive image for others.

2 <https://tiranapost.al/politike/rama-kerkon-ndjese-per-statusin-e-tij-ne-lidhje-me-manhattanin-e-zagreb-i520259>

3 *Annual Report*, Commissioner for the Protection against Discrimination. 2022. https://www.kmd.al/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Raporti-KMD-2022_compressed.pdf

Most media outlets in Albania do not have a written code of ethics, or self-regulating mechanisms like a board of ethics. Still, there are no cases of serious professional consequences at the political and professional level of journalists or media who have been found at fault.

Indicator 4: The body of content overall is inclusive and diverse.

There was no agreement among panelists on the inclusivity and diversity of content. The national public service broadcaster, Albanian Radio and Television, is seen as providing inclusive and diverse content for all audiences, including minorities, with news editions in their languages as well as sign language. Other outlets fail to provide inclusive content, and mainstream media overlook minorities. Even in cases when there is content produced for these minority groups, it is superficial. Furthermore, the vast majority of private outlets do not include the use of sign language in news broadcasts, which is a legal obligation stemming from the law on audiovisual media. Geri Emiri, executive director of Amfora.al, said that online media and social networks are addressing this lack of representation, and communities are also creating their own online platforms to disseminate relevant information.

Ideologies and points of view are not inclusive and diverse, as politics, government affairs, criminal events, accidents, and entertainment content tend to dominate media space while social and cultural issues draw less coverage.

Media employees tend to be women, the panelists agreed; however, the higher one climbs the hierarchy ladder there are fewer women, with leadership positions predominantly occupied by men. Similarly, men dominate spaces as guests on television shows discussing politics, economics, and government, while women appear more in settings exploring social and cultural topics.

Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

The panelists gave Indicator 5 their lowest scores for Principle 1, sharing a pessimistic outlook for media financing and agreeing that low financial

independence remains an important element holding back the growth of media independence in the country. Albania's media market does not operate under a recognizable business model, with a few outlets capturing almost 70 percent of the €50 million (\$55.3 million) advertising market, Liperi emphasized. Government advertising contracts generally do not constitute meaningful amounts that lead to market distortions, the panelists generally agreed, and the government does not offer media subsidies. Nevertheless, most of the panelists mentioned a lack of transparency regarding government advertising contracts.

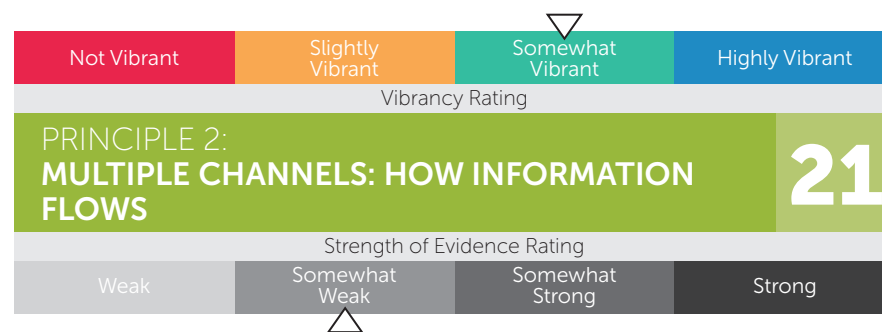
Online portals rely on advertising, Klevin Muka, journalist and moderator for Panorama TV, pointed out, and in many cases, these portals are obliged by advertisers not to publish certain information. Social media marketing has also contributed to a decrease in advertising revenue, since many businesses decide to reach their customers through international social media platforms such as Meta, Alphabet, and TikTok, rather than to employ mainstream media advertising.

Journalists working for mainstream media generally receive fair compensation, while those that work for online portals are poorly paid. Delays in salary payments continue to be an issue overall in the country, as is the level of informality surrounding labor contracts.

Local media outlets are heavily impacted by a lack of financial resources, operating in an environment of advertising scarcity and depending on local actors, while large companies take their advertising business to national media. Furthermore, local media outlets undergoing the digitalization process face high costs, which the government does not cover. Local journalists, for their part, must take different jobs to make a living. They face higher levels of uncertainty, especially regarding working conditions and contractual uncertainties. Often, only a small portion of an agreed-upon payment will be noted in a contract, with the remaining sum paid out informally.

A positive development in the media financing landscape, albeit not representative, is the financing of independent, high-quality articles by NGOs, which allows journalism grant recipients to write about the topics

they want, without an obligation to follow editorial lines driven by an owner's vested interests.



Although Albania's legal framework ensures freedom of speech and access to information, implementation remains highly flawed. Governmental pressure on journalists, through legal means, remains at low levels, but overall the panelists saw increased hostility towards journalists.

For the most part, people in Albania have access to various information channels, although marginalized groups may face barriers in accessing online information.

The law regulates access to public information and transparency, but proactive transparency in institutions remains inadequate. Journalists and CSOs use mechanisms provided by the law, but there is no up-to-date evidence of public awareness of their rights nor data on citizens' access to government information.

Media ownership concentration persists, with transparency concerns related to online portals and audiovisual media. Editorial independence is lacking, with media outlets often aligned with owners' political and economic interests. Non-profit media, funded by international organizations, show more independence in their reporting.

Panelists gave their highest scores for Principle 2 to Indicator 7, on the adequacy of access to channels of information driven by technology. Indicator 10, regarding the lack of independence of information

channels, was scored the lowest due to owners' political and economic interests that push journalists to self-censorship. However, panelists noted an exception in non-profit media, which is financed by international organizations and which exhibit independence in the pursuit of stories and how they report.

Indicator 6: People have rights to create, share, and consume information.

Rights to create, share, and consume information exist on paper, however, enforcement is highly flawed. While Albania's constitution guarantees freedom of speech and freedom of the press, the implementation of these guarantees remains problematic, panelists noted.

Government pressure on journalists remains at low levels, although journalists are increasingly being sued for defamation, a trend confirmed by the Council of Europe.⁴ No journalists, however, were unlawfully detained in 2022. Pressure on journalists also happens through extralegal means, such as harassing phone calls and hostile comments from public officials. In practice, cases taken to courts are prolonged — and when journalists report cases of harassment to the police and the prosecutor's office, they get dismissed, and there is a lack of capacity and willingness to address online safety issues.

The panelists agreed overall that self-censorship by journalists to stay within the bounds of the interests of owners and publishers, seriously inhibits the exercise of freedom of the press. Those who resist self-censorship risk ramifications from owners. The panelists have observed an increasing hostility against journalists in Albania, stirred by

4 Annual Report by the Partner Organisations to the Council of Europe Platform to Promote the Protection of Journalism and Safety of Journalists, Council of Europe. 2023. <https://rm.coe.int/prems-050623-gbr-2519-annual-report-partner-organisations-to-the-safet/1680aace4d>

government officials publicly discrediting the media; some report that they've experienced such treatment themselves.

"From the studies we have conducted, other forms of indirect censorship, or pressure, have been identified. Although it is true that in Albania journalists are not killed or imprisoned, there is a lack of an enabling environment, and lack of safety, to exercise their profession freely," said Blerjana Bino, the Safe Journalists researcher for Albania.

In the aftermath of the cyberattacks on government IT infrastructure, a series of sensitive documents were leaked to the public. In September 2022, following an attack on IT infrastructure of the Ministry of Interior, and a subsequent leak of sensitive information, the Tirana Prosecutor's Office issued an order banning the release of the publication of any data published by the cyberattack authors — raising concerns among organizations working on media freedom, which called for Albanian

authorities to proceed with caution and full consideration for journalistic freedoms protected under both domestic and international law.⁵

The Albanian government does not pressure ICT providers to censor media.

Laws to protect the confidentiality of sources are in place and upheld, with the protection of sources considered a professional secret. However, journalists may be required to disclose their sources if a court decision deems it necessary.

Indicator 7: People have adequate access to channels of information.

People in Albania have adequate access to channels of information. The ICT infrastructure in place allows for adequate access of internet, with 99.9 percent of individuals accessing internet through mobile

5 "Albania: Media must not face criminal prosecution for public interest reporting," Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia. September 23, 2022. <https://safejournalists.net/albania-media-must-not-face-criminal-prosecution-for-public-interest-reporting/?fbclid=IwAR0yj78zvuOrGSvRFbRsg81eAKuOAKySvaQQB1CicIVZ355e2uN2UEiwsll>

👂👂 Rights to create, share, and consume information exist on paper, however, enforcement is highly flawed.

or smart phones.⁶ Albania's ICT infrastructure extends throughout the country. However, some panelists emphasized that barriers to accessing information through ICT persist for certain populations, including marginalized groups and people living in extreme poverty.

The ongoing digitalization of broadcasting services has not impacted access to information in Albania, as there are mechanisms to subsidize digital decoders for marginalized groups. Television and radio signals are available countrywide, although Voko noted the low availability of newspapers outside of the capital. Overall, in 2022, the panelists did not identify any significant obstacles inhibiting Albanians' access to information channels.

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

Albania has a law upholding the right to information; however, its lack of proper implementation is a major issue in the country. The law regulates two critical aspects, as Voko emphasized: access to public information and transparency, which includes information made public without a request, amounting to proactive transparency. Institutions, as mandated by law, have incorporated a transparency subpage into their official websites that lists the transparency program and a contact person, but information remains at a formulaic level, according to one of the panelists.

Journalists and CSOs use the mechanisms facilitated by the right to information law, but up-to-date evidence on the knowledge and access of the public to government information, as well as any complaints on the right to information towards the Commissioner on the Right to Information and Data Protection, are hard to find.

⁶ *Survey on Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) usage in Households and by Individuals in 2022*, Institute of Statistics. January 16, 2023. <https://www.instat.gov.al/media/11169/ict-2022-english.pdf>

According to the panelists, the Media and Information Agency distorts transparency and devalues the role of spokespeople. While the agency's mission is to "ensure transparency in terms of all policies, projects, and activities of the Albanian Government",⁷ panelists expressed concerns about this concentration and control of information--and ultimately media and information freedom--in the country.

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

Panelists agreed that media ownership concentration, in the form of family ownership, is a reality in the Albanian media landscape, especially the audiovisual sphere, and raised two key points on media transparency in the country. First, audiovisual media are legally obliged to be transparent about ownership, but the mushrooming online portals have no such obligations. Finding information on their ownership is impossible at times. The second element relates to the low quality of Albanian audiovisual media's transparency efforts.

Panelists made a distinction between the availability of ownership information through government registers and outlets exercising proactive transparency. Although databases like the Commercial Register and the Beneficial Ownership Register can be used to find ownership information, and are used by journalists, outlets should proactively and transparently inform

people of their ownership so that citizens can make informed judgments on the quality of information they receive and whether it is impacted by the owner's vested interests.

Online portals can be established freely. As of 2018, after a lengthy process, all digital licenses had been allocated; two were awarded to the public service broadcaster, and five to privately-owned media.

“Government pressure on journalists remains at low levels, although journalists are increasingly being sued for defamation, a trend confirmed by the Council of Europe.”

⁷ "Purpose & Mission," Media and Information Agency, n.d., <https://mia.gov.al/en/purpose-mission/>.

The public service broadcaster caters to the needs of all Albanians, and overall, it covers a variety of topics — although some panelists detect partisanship in its editorial lines.

A novel element that emerged during the panel discussion involved the infringement of net neutrality principles by telecommunication companies which, to incentivize the use of certain social media platforms, allow users to navigate these platforms without charge. Although no data was available on this topic in 2022, one panelist is researching this issue.

Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

Information channels in Albania are not independent, driving the panel to give this indicator the lowest scores of Principle 2. The panelists were unanimous on the lack of editorial independence, noting that editorial policies are typically aligned with owners' political and economic interests, with some exceptions such as non-profit media.

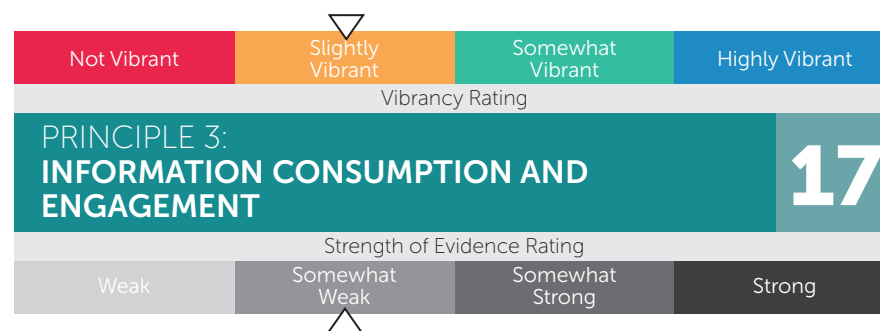
The panel identified two main elements that affect and distort the media landscape and undermine editorial independence in the country: the political and economic interests of owners, mandating editorial policies to fit such interests; and influence buying, where the government influences businesses to take their advertising business to certain outlets in exchange for favorable coverage. The EC's report on Albania for 2022 reflects this reality too, stating, "High-profile business groups have increased their economic penetration in the media market during the reporting period. Media organizations and activists have continued to raise concerns about the use of media channels to promote owners' economic interests and political agendas."⁸

The public service broadcaster is not fully independent in its editorial policies. While its financing structure is mandated by law, including state budget, tariffs, fees, Dervishi pointed out that the public service broadcaster is not financed adequately. Overall, the panelists agreed that the public service broadcaster does not have sole access to certain

8 *Albania Report 2022*, European Commission. October 12, 2022. https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/albania-report-2022_en

information, apart from exclusivity rights to broadcast parliamentary sessions.

The panelists said that government regulatory bodies that oversee frequencies allocation and licenses are not independent and politically neutral, emphasizing that the head of the Audiovisual Media Authority is the former spokesperson of the head of the government. Although the selection of members of the Audiovisual Media Authority that took place in 2022 was a bipartisan process, that did not ensure political neutrality, according to the panelists and news reports such as "The Media Committee selected 6 candidates for AMA membership," published in *Reporter.al*.



Panelists agreed that Albanian citizens typically are unable to distinguish between good and low-quality news, and even less able to engage in fact-checking. They also made the point that anti-media rhetoric and its continuous delegitimization of journalism do not help strengthen the importance of improving media and information literacy and factchecking. Still, Albania has taken some positive steps towards mainstreaming media and information literacy in basic curricula, thanks to the support of international donors and CSOs. The accreditation of a media education course for pre-university teachers marks another positive development.

The highest-scored indicator for Principle 3 relates to community media, since Albanian legislation recognizes outlets set up for religious communities as community media. These four licensed radio community outlets in Albania cater to the needs of the Bektashi, Christian, Orthodox,

and Muslim communities. Panelists agreed that technology has facilitated the setup of non-religious community media through online portals, which cater to the Roma community and youth. Indicators 11 and 12, regarding the safe usage of the internet and media literacy, tied for the lowest scores for Principle 3. Panelists noted that although there are laws and regulations in place to ensure data and digital security, implementation is faulty. Additionally, while there have been efforts to improve media literacy levels, the current level is low, especially.

Indicator 11: People can safely use the internet due to privacy protections and security tools.

The panel agreed that there are laws and regulations in place that aim to ensure data privacy and digital security, but, as with other areas, their implementation is highly flawed. In 2022, a new Law on Personal Data Protection aimed at harmonizing Albanian legislation with the EU's General Data Protection Regulation, was under consultation. Panelists noted that some courts tend to misuse the data protection law to limit the public's and media's access to information, providing anonymized decisions, for example, in cases of high public interest.

Media outlets demonstrate basic understanding and skills regarding security, but the panelists drew a distinction between larger, better-resourced outlets and smaller ones that lack a proper IT department, equipment, and understanding of digital security. Online portals remain very vulnerable to cybersecurity threats, as Erjon Curraj, a digital transformation specialist, confirmed, pointing to a low level of investment in cybersecurity issues paired with low awareness.

Although disaggregated data on attacks on media outlets is hard to find, Albania's State Police reported 504 cybercrimes during 2022, as reported by the Ministry of Internal Affairs. To illustrate the cybersecurity situation in Albania, panelists mentioned the cyberattack on the National Agency for Information Society and

other government IT infrastructure, which impacted government websites and online public service delivery. The attack was followed by leaks of enormous files of information of Albanian citizens' and institutions, including classified information.

Some organizations, such as the British Council-led Media for All, have offered digital security trainings; however, the number of trainings, in the panel's assessment, remains low.

Furthermore, the panelists felt that Albanian citizens have a low level of digital skills and digital literacy overall, as well as low awareness of the use algorithms to drive social media, although there is a dearth of updated data for 2022 to confirm that impression.

Indicator 12: People have the necessary skills and tools to be media literate.

Albania has taken some positive steps to advance media and information literacy programs. Pre-university pupils receive an introduction to media and information literacy concepts; however, the panelists considered these efforts fairly basic. Nevertheless, the government is taking positive steps towards mainstreaming media and information literacy

in basic curricula, thanks to the support of international organizations and CSOs. The accreditation of the media education course for pre-university teachers marks another positive development; a pilot of the curriculum – implemented by the Albania Media Institute with EU and UNESCO support – wrapped up in 2022, reaching 20 schools in all. With funding from the U.S. Embassy in Albania, IREX also has offered a series of media and

information literacy aimed at pre-university teachers – an approach deemed important given the level of impact and reach teachers have in their classrooms.

“ Online portals remain very vulnerable to cybersecurity threats, as Erjon Curraj, a digital transformation specialist, confirmed, pointing to a low level of investment in cybersecurity issues paired with low awareness.

Media literacy levels remain especially low among older generations, the panelists noted. Citizens show poor ability to distinguish between good and low-quality news, and they are even less equipped to fact-checking news and information they consume. The Bulgaria-based Open Society Institute Sofia's report *How It Started, How It is Going: Media Literacy Index 2022* placed Albania 37th out of the 41 European countries studied. Also, panelists made the point that the anti-media rhetoric and its continuous delegitimization of the press do not help the case of strengthening media and information literacy, as well as fact-checking. Furthermore, there is no evidence on how and to what extent citizens use fact-checking or debunking tools or websites.

Indicator 13: People engage productively with the information that is available to them.

Panelists believed that journalists and CSOs use their right to access public information, however, the response rate from institutions is low. Indeed, for 2022, the Commissioner on Data Protection and Freedom of Information reports 1032 complaints against public institutions, central and local, for failure to provide access to public information, 44 percent of which are from journalists, and 33 percent from citizens, according to the Commissioner on Data Protection and Freedom of Information *Annual Report* of that year.

Panelists noted that journalists, apart from not receiving answers to their requests for information, often face repercussions in the form of harassment for requesting certain information. The leakage of information on requests submitted by journalists might also inhibit further requests for information. One panelist mentioned that many institutions take the decisions of the Commissioner on Data Protection and Freedom of Information to the courts; however, the courts are overwhelmed, and the process takes too long — and thus public interest wanes.

“ Citizens show poor ability to distinguish between good and low-quality news, and they are even less equipped to fact-checking news and information they consume.

Mechanisms that foster public debate and discussion are in place, both in person and virtual. However, the outcome of these processes is irrelevant. Although there is no data on participation, and public debate platforms, panelists agree that they are typically perfunctory. Television debates are subject to a certain agenda in most cases. There is no data on the reporting disinformation, and reporting hate speech remains low.

Indicator 14: Media and information producers engage with their audience's needs.

The panelists generally agreed that media and content producers do not engage qualitatively in understanding audience needs and interests. There is an overall tendency to run after clicks among outlets, often sacrificing audience needs and content quality, as demonstrated by mass-produced reality shows and television debate programs.

There is no widely accepted audience measurement tool in the country for audiovisual media, whereas online portals can measure audience through metrics facilitated by technology. Curraj felt that there is a lack of knowledge on how to use technology-enabled tools to understand

the needs of the audience, regarding programming timeframes, content, etc.

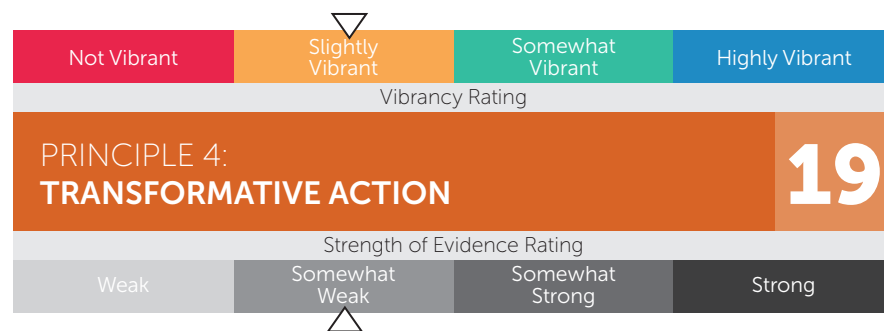
Collaboration between media and CSOs is not common, but when it has happened it has been successful — in the environmental field, for example. Although media and CSOs supposedly share goals, they are sometimes reluctant to collaborate.

Indicator 15: Community media provides information relevant for community engagement.

Albanian law recognizes community media—more specifically audio transmissions for the community—as non-for-profit organizations, either public or private, that work toward the social development of the

community and serve their interests. Community media have access to no-cost licenses. Panelists made a distinction between the provisions of Albanian law and UNESCO’s definition that the VIBE methodology uses. There are currently four licensed community radio outlets in Albania, catering the needs of Bektashi, Christian, Orthodox, and Muslim communities.

Outside of these religious community radio stations, the overall community media landscape in Albania remains rather bleak. Panelists agree there is a low number of community media in Albania, although they are highly important to the communities they represent. Technology, perhaps, presents an opportunity, as it has facilitated the setup of community media through online portals. Panelists agree that community media, such as those catering to the Roma community and youth, do not tend to spread disinformation or misinformation, and focus mostly on coverage of social, cultural, and local issues.



Panelists noted that nonpartisan news and information sources are in the minority and reach limited audiences, while people tend to seek out information that confirms their beliefs and remain within their information bubbles — making it difficult for people to shape their views and opinions based on quality information. The civil society sector, however, does use quality information, the panelists felt, and they awarded the highest scores to the related indicator. The panelists agreed that there is a mutually low level of trust between CSOs and the media, while recognizing the importance of such collaboration. Panelists mentioned that CSOs contribute to decision making processes, however,

there is no evidence of the impact of these contributions.

The low scores for Indicator 19, in contrast, reflect the government’s poor use of quality information to make public policy decisions. Instead, a culture of propaganda and intolerance for critical voices prevails.

Indicator 16: Information producers and distribution channels enable or encourage information sharing across ideological lines.

Nonpartisan news and information sources do exist; however, they are in the minority and do not have extensive audiences; in fact, those that produce quality journalism have a small audience, according to one panelist. The panel provided empirical evidence, due to the lack of research-based data, highlighting that people in Albania tend to seek out information sources that confirm their beliefs — preferring to stay cocooned in their information bubbles, whether on social media or other platforms.

“On social media interaction, in TV debates, and in other media spaces, there is a lot of unethical language, lack of tolerance for different opinions and polarization,” Bino noted, adding that there does not seem to be a well-organized or systematic effort, or a culture of knowledge and information based on facts.

There is no evidence that opinions and perspectives are shaped by fact-based information, and primary sources of information are low quality sources. Such opinions are shaped also by panelists’ observations of social media interactions.

Indicator 17: Individuals use quality information to inform their actions.

Given the lack of editorial independence in the current media environment, it is difficult for people to shape views and opinions based on quality reporting. Furthermore, people tend to be pushed towards certain opinions by family members, and in local settings in particular, people sometimes confront local officials with information they have

collected themselves, one of the panelists commented. Panelists emphasize that many people cannot distinguish between propaganda, which at times acts as disinformation, and news. However, it should be noted that these claims are based on empirical evidence.

People also fall victim to misinformation regarding health decisions, such as supplements or cure-all medicines that are heavily advertised in the media. Although in some cases these supplements do not have direct health effects – helpful or harmful – they cost people financially and could undermine trust in media.

Indicator 18: Civil society uses quality information to improve communities.

The majority of CSOs rely on quality information when setting their mission, objectives, and programs, but the panelists had no evidence of efforts by CSOs to reduce misinformation or mal-information. However, they said that CSOs rely on international organizations' reports, state audit reports, and other evidence-based information. It can be argued that, while they do not disseminate mis- and mal-information, their evidence-based example might contribute to reducing its spread. CSOs contribute to decision-making processes, however, there is no evidence of the impact of such contributions. As one of the panelists mentioned, decision-making is arbitrary, and laws are prepared by institutions, leaving little to no space for actual contributions from other non-institutional actors.

Similarly, the 2022 EC Country Report 2022 on Albania emphasized that cooperation between civil society and the government needs to be strengthened to ensure meaningful participation of CSOs in decision-making processes, including EU accession negotiations.

The panelists acknowledged the importance of collaboration between

“ The lack of trust between CSOs and the media keeps collaborative work at a low level.

media and civil society. Additionally, CSOs approach media for collaboration, according to one panelist, and media outlets sometimes offer space to well-established organizations on topics they find of interest. The panelists agreed that while such partnerships are important but reinforced that the lack of trust between CSOs and the media keeps collaborative work at a low level.

Indicator 19: Government uses quality information to make public policy decisions.

The panelists strongly disagreed that the government uses quality information to make public policy decisions; accordingly, they gave this indicator the lowest score in Principle 4. Mechanisms to engage and foster dialogue between the government and CSOs and the media are outdated, and when used, they tend to spread propaganda, the panelists believed. Press conferences serve as platforms for officials to read statements, and feedback or interaction with journalists is limited. Government officials employ their own channels of communication, and media outlets are presented with ready-made and government-produced content to be disseminated. The national consultation platform used by the government to seek opinions of citizens across a series of topics seems to be used instead as tool to justify their decisions.

“ The government engages in disinformation to bury critical media investigations, and there is a lack of reaction to cases of corruption.

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The panelists were unanimous about the state of public discourse, which they feel is not based on evidence and facts, but rather on propaganda, and clouded by officials attacking critical voices among CSOs and the media. “Misinformation from political parties and public officials continuously affects public discourse,” says Besar Likmeta, editor-in-chief of Reporter.al.

There seems to be a lack of due diligence on the part of officials when quoting or disseminating problematic articles that justify their narratives. However, panelists mentioned that government officials do quote, at times, articles from quality media outlets, but that seems to happen only to attack political rivals.

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

The panelists agreed overall that the government reaction to reporting of corruption is inadequate. They emphasized that in cases where reporting exposes corruption, typically a few scapegoats are held accountable, rather than the main perpetrators. One panelist noted that in some cases suspensions and disciplinary measures do occur, mainly for low-ranking officials, but reaction in general is weak. Some panelists also lamented the lack of motivation and reaction from justice institutions. Dervishi pointed out that even in cases buttressed by high-quality evidence of wrongdoing, officials attempt to construct a different narrative.

One of the panelists said that in certain cases, such as elder abuse, public sensitivity might help stir a swift reaction — unlike cases of abuse towards other vulnerable groups, such as the Roma and Egyptian communities, or members of the LGBTQ+ community. Another panelist corroborated this by pointing out numerous cases involving low-level officials mistreating marginalized groups with little to no consequences. Public institutions seem to respond more to public emotion than to the severity of issues.

Although 2022 was not an election year, the panelists noted that during elections there is no major impact since most information stems from public election offices, rather than reports by journalists.

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