

THE EDITORS' ROLE IN MEDIA INTEGRITY PROTECTION IN ALBANIA

DECLINE IN THE ROLE AND INFLUENCE OF EDITORS

by ILDA LONDO

INTRODUCTION

The situation of editors in Albania cannot be viewed separately from that of journalists and the general media context, as they are plagued by the same problems and conditions: an informal and dysfunctional market, shrinking advertising and funding sources for the media, patterns of ownership of the media system, and the influence of the well-established triad of politics, business and media. Most of the current generation of editors in the country belong to the generation of journalists raised in the media that emerged in the 90s, lacking professional training, but strong on passion and political participation. They witnessed the evolution of the media scene from a highly partisan media to one that seems more professional, but is still heavily influenced by external interests. However, younger editors have also slowly become part of this group in the media, bringing perhaps more journalism-oriented skills, which are not always necessarily applied in the current media environment.

The current report aims to draw a picture of the editors in the Albanian media, their evolution, the way they are influenced by the cultural landscape and their own influence on the integrity of Albanian media. For this purpose, the report draws on previous research related to various aspects of Albanian media development, as well as using direct, in-depth interviews with editors, media experts, and journalists conducted in the period March-April 2016.

1 THE LEGAL SITUATION OF EDITORS

1.1 THE THEORETICAL EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE OF ALBANIAN MEDIA

Albanian legislation does not specifically address the role of editors, nor ascribe to them particular freedoms, rights or responsibilities. However, parts of the legislation indirectly pertain to the work and role of editors, both in setting

the tone and guaranteeing a climate for freedom of expression, and in regulating content in a few limited cases.

More specifically, freedom of expression and the right to access official information are included as personal rights and freedoms in the Constitution of Albania, while censorship is clearly banned.¹ In addition, other media-specific laws also guarantee freedom of expression, such as the Law on the Press and the Law on Audiovisual Media. The Law on the Press states: “*The press is free. Freedom of the press is protected by law.*”² Furthermore, Article 4 of the Law on Audiovisual Media ranks freedom of expression and freedom of audiovisual media operators among the fundamental principles of audiovisual broadcast.³

In early 2012, Albania adopted comprehensive reforms of its criminal and civil defamation laws, bringing these into much closer alignment with European democratic standards. Albania reformed its provisions on insult and libel in 2012. However, the law does not specify who bears the responsibility in court trials, the editor, the journalist, or the media outlet. Practice has shown that in the bigger media outlets the company hires law firms and secures court representation and legal protection for journalists.⁴ Interviews with editors also revealed that the major media companies do offer legal protection for editors and journalists in cases involving lawsuits.⁵

According to legislation, sources are protected, and journalists cannot be forced to violate their confidentiality. Protecting confidential sources of information is one of the guiding principles for audiovisual media operators, as regulated by the Law on Audiovisual Media.⁶ In addition, Article 159 of the Code of Penal Procedure includes journalists among the professions that are not forced to reveal their sources of information, which are regarded as a professional secret.⁷ However, the court has the discretion to determine whether the data are essential for proof, and then the court can order the journalists to reveal their sources. The provisions do not specify the role of editors within newsrooms and their responsibilities in this regard. There have been no such court cases to test the current regulations and the court practice.

Finally, the right to reply is regulated by the Law on Audiovisual Media, establishing the Council of Ethics, which functions within the regulatory authority framework, as the responsible authority for dealing with complaints from the public about the conduct of the audiovisual media. The Council of Ethics is responsible for developing detailed regulations for addressing complaints and for acting as an intermediary between the media and the public.

1 Constitution of Albania, 1998, Art. 22.

2 Law no. 8239, On Press, 1997.

3 Law on Audiovisual Media 97/2013.

4 Albanian Media Institute, *Monitorim për zbatimin e ligjeve për shpifjen dhe fyerjen*, 2015.

5 Interviews with editors.

6 Law on Audiovisual Media 97/2013, Art. 4.

7 Code of Penal Procedure, 2012, Art. 159.

ALBANIAN LEGISLATION DOES NOT SPECIFICALLY ADDRESS THE ROLE OF EDITORS, NOR ASCRIBE TO THEM PARTICULAR FREEDOMS, RIGHTS OR RESPONSIBILITIES. INTERVIEWS WITH EDITORS REVEALED THAT THE MAJOR MEDIA COMPANIES DO OFFER LEGAL PROTECTION FOR EDITORS AND JOURNALISTS IN CASES INVOLVING LAWSUITS.

However, this body was established only in March 2016 and the regulation has yet to be drafted.

1.2

EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE OF THE ALBANIAN MEDIA IN PRACTICE

While not specifically covering editorial independence or the conduct and role of editors, overall the legislation guarantees freedom of expression, including media freedom, in a satisfactory way. However, when it comes to implementing the principles set out in law, and to translating them into further newsroom mechanisms that protect editorial independence, the picture is dramatically different.

Newsrooms have general rules by which they operate, but these cover mainly the administrative part of their work and do not focus on the content. A survey in 2015 revealed that 65 percent of media employees reported being unaware of any written editorial policy at their media.⁸ The survey also highlighted that the perception of respondents related to editorial policy was strictly related to siding with specific political parties and not to professional standards of reporting,⁹ which is indicative of the influence of politics on media functioning.

Various studies of media freedom and professionalism point at an entrenched trend towards self-censorship among Albanian media, which are more concerned to protect the business or political interests of the owners, rather than the public interest. A survey investigating trends towards self-censorship revealed that 73 percent of respondents believed that Albanian journalists would avoid covering news that was not in line with the interests of their media outlet, while the personal experience of media employees participating in the survey was that 48 percent of them had avoided covering certain news events frequently or several times.¹⁰ When asked about the internal newsroom structure that contributed most to self-censorship, 56 percent of respondents stated that it was the result of signals or direct orders from the editor and owner.¹¹ As previous interviews with journalists have revealed, journalists generally know when they start working at a media outlet what news to report and what to avoid, or are “educated” along the way, if they make mistakes.¹²

The pervasive existence of self-censorship was also admitted by the editors interviewed for this report. In fact, most of them asked not to be identified, which is another indicator of self-censorship within this group. When asked about the current role of editors in the Albanian media, they agreed that

8 BIRN Albania, *A blind eye on news: Self-censorship in the Albanian media*, 2015.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Londo, “Albania,” in *Media Integrity Matters*, 2014.

A SURVEY IN 2015 REVEALED THAT 65 PERCENT OF MEDIA EMPLOYEES REPORTED BEING UNAWARE OF ANY WRITTEN EDITORIAL POLICY AT THEIR MEDIA. WHEN ASKED ABOUT THE INTERNAL NEWSROOM STRUCTURE THAT CONTRIBUTED MOST TO SELF-CENSORSHIP, THE SURVEY INDICATED THAT 56 PERCENT OF RESPONDENTS STATED THAT IT WAS THE RESULT OF SIGNALS OR DIRECT ORDERS FROM THE EDITOR AND OWNER.

in theory it was an important role: *“In principle, the role of the editor is definitive in giving a face to the newspaper, in structuring its professional profile. The editor serves as a shop window: he guides the work of the staff in the morning meeting and filters all information that will be served to the public.”*¹³ Aleksander Cipa, former editor-in-chief of several media and currently head of the trade union, said that *“the role of editors is important in media that are losing their importance from one day to the next.”*¹⁴ In general, the role of editor was perceived as a key role, given that the editor is the responsible person for conveying the news in its final form to the public.¹⁵

Nonetheless, all interviewees expressed deep pessimism about the current role of editors in the Albanian media and about their freedom and professional integrity when supervising the chain of news reporting. One of the interviewees stated: *“I believe that editors have a key role in a media outlet, but in Albania it is all for the wrong reasons. From my perspective, their role is to represent the interests of the owner and not to serve as a filter or as a key figure in preserving professional standards and ethics.”*¹⁶ Another long-term previous editor and current media observer also comments that the importance and impact of editors on professional reporting have diminished: *“The role of editors has been changed to making sure that the newspaper has enough materials for publication or that the website is updated regularly. The diminishing number of journalists, the strengthening of influence by owners, the definition of editorial policy in favour of the economic and political interests of media owners, have all led to a weakening and degradation of the editors’ role.”*¹⁷

Editors also agree that, apart from the professionalism of editors, other factors also affect the orientation of journalists’ work towards the public interest. According to one editor, *“it is a question of the degree to which you can preserve integrity in this environment. Often other factors, not dependent on the editor, are very important, such as the amount of independence he has from the owner, the owner’s interference to use the media for his own purposes, or financial problems, such as delays in salary payment, which negatively affect the motivation of journalists. All of these factors are present in a large segment of the media, directly affecting media integrity.”*¹⁸ Another editor points to tabloidisation as another risk that affects the performance of editors and their impact on the media, but concedes that the relation with the owners is the key variable in the whole picture: *“Unfortunately, the role of the editor in Albania has become weaker over time. In general, the role of the individual in Albanian media, with a few exceptions, has become relative to the point that it is difficult to distinguish*

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13 Interview with an anonymous editor of a daily newspaper, Tirana, 7 April 2016.

14 Interview with Aleksander Cipa, chair of the Union of Albanian Journalists, Tirana, 14 April 2016.

15 Interviews with editors.

16 Interview with Besar Likmeta, editor, BIRN, Tirana, 18 April 2016.

17 Interview with Lutfi Dervishi, former editor, Tirana, 13 April 2016.

18 Interview with Ornela Liperi, editor, *Monitor* magazine, Tirana, 10 April 2016.

*between editors; consequently, newspapers are often copies of one another, and their identity is not solid and stable. However, the main criterion in hiring an editor in Albania is conformism and respect for the editorial policy of the media owner, even when this policy goes against every professional standard.*¹⁹

Unfortunately, the degradation of the importance of editors in the professional realm seems to have become more pronounced in recent years, reflecting the evolution of the media scene and its trends. According to editors and media experts, this degradation is directly linked to the evolution of the media system and the structures within the system. The new media that emerged in the 90s were often established by journalists, and at the time regarded as highly partisan and often passionate, a situation which affected their professionalism.²⁰ Afterwards the landscape changed: businessmen took over the media scene and currently dominate it almost entirely. This change, along with the use of media for business interests, has led directly to a weakening of editorial influence. *“Some time ago the newspapers had the face of their editors, today they have the face of their owners. And, it is clear that newspaper owners are not professionals: the editors are. The face of the owners has not made the media prettier; it has made it uglier,”* says an interviewee.²¹ A few interviewees tend to be less nostalgic and more optimistic in this regard, noting that, while the passion of editors is no longer there, the work of editors is currently guided by interest rather than professional competition.²² However, the prevailing feeling on the current situation of editors is definitely pessimistic, noticing their waning power and influence within the newsroom, especially vis-a-vis the owner: *“The editor is no longer the captain of the ship. The owners have assigned him to the ship mast and the editor screams in vain, because the owner is behind the steering wheel, the owner is the captain. Paradoxically, staying on top of the ship gives the editor a better view, and it is he who first understands when the ship is going in the right direction, the same way he understands when a shipwreck is unavoidable.”*²³

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2 THE EDUCATIONAL SITUATION OF EDITORS

Accurate and systematic statistics on journalists, editors or media employees in general in the country are missing. According to data gathered in 2002 from media owners and managers, the media had about 2,018 employees, of

19 Interview with an anonymous editor of a daily newspaper, Tirana, 30 March 2016.

20 Londo, “Albania,” in *Media Integrity Matters*, 2014.

21 Interview with an anonymous editor of a daily newspaper, Tirana, 25 March 2016.

22 Interview with Ornela Liperi, editor, *Monitor* magazine, Tirana, 10 April 2016.

23 Interview with an anonymous editor of a daily newspaper, Tirana, 30 March 2016.

whom about half were full-time journalists and editors.²⁴ The current estimate of the trade union of journalists is that at the end of 2014 there were about 5,527 employees in the media sector, and about half were people involved in producing editorial content, namely journalists and editors.²⁵

It is difficult to track and to estimate how many of the students who obtained degrees in journalism went on to work in the media and stayed in the profession. A recent survey on this field revealed that 64 percent of polled journalists had a bachelor's degree, while 32 percent had a postgraduate degree, and another 1.7 percent had completed a doctoral degree.²⁶ The general opinion is that holding a degree in journalism has become essential for working as a journalist at the current stage,²⁷ and the data reveal that in 2014, 27 percent of polled media employees from a representative sample declared they had graduated in fields other than journalism, compared to 73 percent who said they had studied journalism, communication, or both.²⁸ However, the education requirement is not necessarily true for editors. According to the same survey, 12 percent of polled people in leading positions in the newsroom have majored in journalism, as opposed to 39 percent of reporters and 15 percent of editors polled.²⁹ The division is even more dramatic in the case of more advanced degrees in journalism: only 6 percent of managing directors in the media have an advanced journalism degree, while three times as many reporters seem to have a master's degree in journalism.³⁰

Overall, the editors interviewed for this report did not see a direct relation between their degree and their profession. In fact, most of them did not study journalism in school, but other degrees, and ended up in journalism mainly due to passion. This also shows the relative youth of the profession in the country, and the dynamics of its development, where the first people who became editors and continued their careers in the media came from other study areas, such as literature, foreign languages, or others. The relatively low presence of journalism degrees among editors is also related to the late introduction and development of journalism education in the country, leading to a context where several more years will be needed for journalism graduates to gain experience and become editors.

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24 Albanian Media Institute, *Monitoring Albanian Media Landscape 2002*, 2002.

25 Interview with Aleksander Cipa, chair of the Union of Albanian Journalists, Tirana, 14 April 2016.

26 Godole, *Gazetaria Shqiptare ne Tranzicion*, 2014, p.151.

27 Ibid, p.153.

28 Ibid, p.154.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

In the context of the education and profile of editors, it is equally important to examine the appointment procedures within media outlets. Given the general lack of written rules within media outlets, especially in relation to editorial policy, there are no specific written procedures for hiring and dismissing editors, the same as with all the staff. Similarly, there is a lack of transparency, and an application process is totally missing, making this more like an internal call for job positions, rather than an open competition with clearly established criteria. However, the general trend is for journalists to rise to become editors after some years of experience: *“In general the editors come from within the media outlet where they first worked as journalists, and it is often merit-based, depending on the experience of the journalist.”*³¹ However, other interviewees indicate that *“recruitment of editors is mainly based on personal relations and recommendations”*³² and *“it does not go through a public and open procedure, application of several persons, choosing through an equal opportunity contest based on merit, etc.”*³³ Another opinion was that the process of hiring editors depends totally on the media ownership, on the media owners’ whims and also on gossip and reputation.³⁴ Journalists or the newsroom in general are never involved in decision-making about hiring or dismissing editors.

However, despite these varied opinions on the process of hiring editors, all interviewees agreed that the dismissal process was the truly problematic element. Again, the main culprit is the long shadow of the owner and the need to be guided by the media’s business or political interests. *“It is wrong to judge an editor on whether he is capable of doing a good job. It would be more correct to see how free he is to do his job,”* one editor said.³⁵

The process of dismissal is equally lacking in transparency, but the prevailing perception is that dismissals of editors are almost never linked to professional reasons. According to an interviewee, *“usually the reasons for dismissing an editor are extra professional: he is not loyal to the owner, does not obey his orders on a specific editorial line, or even more banal causes. It is hard to remember a case when an editor has been dismissed for doing a poor job.”*³⁶ Both editors and experts agree on this point, explaining it with the way the media system works in the country: *“Most media owners are perfectly clear that they will not make money with media as a business, e.g. the sale of newspapers below cost for*

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31 Interview with an anonymous TV news editor, Tirana, 13 April 2016.

32 Interview with Lutfi Dervishi, former editor, Tirana, 13 April 2016.

33 Interview with Ornela Liperi, editor, *Monitor* magazine, Tirana, 10 April 2016.

34 Interview with Aleksander Cipa, chair of the Union of Albanian Journalists, Tirana, 14 April 2016.

35 Interview with Alfred Lela, director, *Mapo* newspaper, Tirana, 7 April 2016.

36 Interview with an anonymous editor of a daily newspaper, Tirana, 13 April 2016.

many years shows this. So, they do not want a quality editor; to make professional news, but a loyal one. On the other hand, the media has to have some impact, too, so the quality of the editor is not entirely unimportant; in general, the owners try to strike this balance.”³⁷

Parallel to the lack of transparency and questionability in the hiring and dismissal of editors, there is also a lack of willingness or ability to organise into professional bodies, which is a trend visible not only for editors, but for the whole media scene. This is connected to a range of reasons, but the main ones are the informality of the media scene, along with a lack of solidarity and trade union culture. “There are no serious efforts towards the professional organisation of editors, and the main reason is the lack of trust among editors that establishing an association would protect them. The conviction that we live in a deeply informal society and system is very strong, and the legal protection that an association could offer is perceived as a luxury matter related to image, rather than to real protection,” said an interviewee.³⁸ Another editor was also unconvinced of the benefits of self-organisation: “If an association is missing, it means it is not necessary. We have so many problems in the media, this kind of organisation could be an extra luxury.”³⁹ On the other hand, other editors noted that competition and lack of solidarity are important factors that hinder self-organisation of editors: “There is no Order of Editors, or Order of Journalists. But there could very well be established an Order of Enmity between Editors. My impression is that editors sometimes tend to embrace the hatred of political parties, and sometimes there is also professional or personal envy.”⁴⁰

4 THE ECONOMIC SITUATION OF EDITORS

Economically speaking, the editors find themselves at the peak of the newsroom hierarchy. There are no statistics on the range of salaries of media employees, editors included. According to estimates by the Union of Albanian Journalists, salaries for editors range from one to three million ALL (approx. 714 to 2,140 euro) while the salaries for editors in local media are estimated to be much lower, ranging from 100,000 ALL to 300,000 ALL (approx. 107 to 357 euro).⁴¹ The union estimates that there are three levels of salaries for journalists,

37 Interview with Besar Likmeta, editor, BIRN, Tirana, 18 April 2016.

38 Interview with an anonymous editor of a daily newspaper, Tirana, 11 April 2016.

39 Interview with an anonymous editor of a daily newspaper, Tirana, 11 April 2016. (Note here please that interviews with two editors of daily newspapers who preferred to stay anonymous took place on the same date.)

40 Interview with Alfred Lela, director, *Mapo* newspaper, Tirana, 7 April 2016.

41 Interview with Aleksander Cipa, chair of the Union of Albanian Journalists, Tirana, 14 April 2016.

ACCORDING TO ESTIMATES BY THE UNION OF ALBANIAN JOURNALISTS, SALARIES FOR EDITORS RANGE FROM ONE TO THREE MILLION ALL (APPROX. 714 TO 2,140 EURO) WHILE THE SALARIES FOR EDITORS IN LOCAL MEDIA ARE ESTIMATED TO BE MUCH LOWER, RANGING FROM 100,000 ALL TO 300,000 ALL (APPROX. 107 TO 357 EURO).

depending on their position and the media where they work. The best paid journalists have an average wage of 480-526 euro, the second level reaches 395-438 euro, while the lower level media pay their journalists an average of 260 euro per month.⁴² Public broadcaster journalists are considered to be paid relatively well, but higher levels of editors or distinguished journalists in commercial media receive much higher salaries. The average wage for journalists at the public broadcaster is 420 euro, while the best salaries among *Radio Televizioni Shqiptar (RTSH)* journalists are about 510 euro.⁴³ Another survey confirms this situation: 65 percent of journalists have a monthly salary of 350-613 euro.⁴⁴

Although exact or official data on the salaries of media employees in general and across newsroom levels are missing, the perception by and the opinion of interviewees is unanimous: editors tend to be well-paid compared to the journalists in the newsroom. According to an interviewee, *“the editors are the highest paid in the newsroom and this gives them a certain financial and professional independence, compared to the journalist, who is more prone to being influenced financially.”*⁴⁵ On the other hand, given the general insecurity of the job, if certain lines are crossed, in principle the editors are equally insecure and totally subject to self-censorship. In fact, it was pointed out that while receiving the highest financial reward, the editors are often in a difficult position: *“Often the editor is the most self-censored person in the newsroom, having to protect owners’ interests, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, having to motivate journalists. It is a difficult job, as he must inspire people who are poorly paid and who work in difficult conditions, while also protecting the business interests which keep the media alive. So, from the human viewpoint, it can be difficult.”*⁴⁶

5 THE POLITICAL SITUATION OF EDITORS

Editors in Albania usually are not formally members of political parties, with the exception of party newspapers. However, the affiliation with political wings or figures in some cases is clear, mainly based on the overall editorial line of a given media outlet, but sometimes also based on personal conviction. Another reason for journalists and editors to be close to political parties is related to the desire to secure better paid or more secure jobs, and even to change careers. There have been several cases of editors becoming MPs, and even more often, of journalists and editors becoming spokespersons for, or directors of public institutions: *“Unfortunately journalism has never been and*

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42 Ibid.

43 Londo, “Albania,” in *Media Integrity Matters*, 2014.

44 Godole, *Gazetaria Shqiptare ne Tranzicion*, 2014, p.157.

45 Interview with Besar Likmeta, editor, BIRN, Tirana, 18 April 2016.

46 Ibid.

still is not alluring enough to keep someone doing that profession. Many journalists and editors prefer to go on and work in state bodies and public institutions after a while.”⁴⁷

While a change of career by making use of political affiliations is a visible form of dependency of media employees on politics, it is a relatively minor one in terms of its effect on media integrity. The most threatening form identified is the total conformism of editors to the politicians and political parties favoured by their media and the inability to distance themselves from these forms of influence. According to a representative of academia, “the relation between editors and political parties is a clientelist one, based on the needs and requirements of the media owner, and, if the editor is a crucial figure, based also on his own interests.”⁴⁸ Another opinion is that these relations are definitely closer than they should be, affecting media independence.⁴⁹ “The relation of editors with politicians ranges from hostility to friendship, but mostly friendship, and this is not a good sign,” established another interviewee.⁵⁰

However, against the overall background of the weakening role of editors vis-a-vis owners, most editors noted a tendency to maintain distance from politicians, while the owners have become more hands-on when handling relations with politicians. For example, it was established that “the weight and importance of editors have fallen sharply, because politicians call the owner directly and do not care about the editor-in-chief.”⁵¹ While agreeing, another editor notes that this trend is not as positive as it might seem: “Paradoxically, the relation of editors with politicians has weakened through the years, but this is not good news. The relation between editors and politicians is disappearing because the politicians find it more convenient to have a direct relationship with the media owner rather than with the direct dependant.”⁵²

6 CASE STUDIES

It is difficult to find positive case studies of editors sacrificing their privileges or even job to uphold the public interest instead of the private interests of the media provider for which they work, given the overall nature of the media system and its clientelist foundation. Furthermore, given the overall reluctance of the editors interviewed to speak freely and with clear positive or negative

47 Interview with Lutfi Dervishi, former editor, Tirana, 13 April 2016.

48 Interview with Iris Luarasi, professor of journalism, Tirana, 13 April 2016.

49 Interview with Besar Likmeta, editor, BIRN, Tirana, 18 April 2016.

50 Interview with Alfred Lela, director, *Mapo* newspaper, Tirana, 7 April 2016.

51 Interview with an anonymous TV news editor, Tirana, 9 April 2016.

52 Interview with an anonymous editor of a daily newspaper, Tirana, 18 April 2016.

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examples, this task becomes more difficult. Nonetheless, the following sections will try to focus more on trends, rather than on specific persons or media.

6.1

ONLINE MEDIA AND PORTALS AS A WAY TO GAIN MORE FREEDOM

A tendency in recent years has been for both young and well-known editors and journalists to move away from traditional media and establish news portals or online media, which are considered a way to gain the freedom that is missing in the newsrooms of traditional media. For example, Andi Bushati and Armand Shkullaku, two well-known journalists and columnists, have started their own website *lapsi.al* (Shkullaku also works as director of information at a television news station, *ABC News*). Anila Basha, for a long time editor-in-chief of the daily *Gazeta Shqiptare* and then of the daily *Shqiptarja.com*, has founded the website *newsbomb.al*. Clirim Peka, after working at some media outlets, started his own website *syri.net*, and so on. It is difficult to say that all these cases are purely the result of the need to conduct journalism that serves first and foremost the public interest, and some of them are the outcome of disagreements with the previous media provider for which they worked. At the same time, there is even less transparency at these portals compared to traditional media, and their claim to independence is questionable. Still, since the online media are still in principle more free than traditional media, this is a potentially positive trend that journalists and editors are exploiting and one that could be further exploited in the future.

6.2

THE FIRING OF EDITORS FOR POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC REASONS

All interviewees agreed that the reasons for firing an editor are invariably related to the owners' political and economic interests, mainly because of the failure of the editor to respect and promote these interests, or pressure from politicians to remove a certain editor. A few editors who did not want to be identified mentioned as the most recent case that of a daily newspaper, where the editor was recently changed at the request of a highly-placed official, since the editorial line was against the government. Such cases, while known to the newsroom and the media community, almost never become a matter for public debate, reflecting the overall nature of the relations and dynamics between the actors, as well as the need to preserve this status quo. One of the cases when the decision to fire an editor received some public attention was perhaps in May 2010, when the shareholders' board of *Vizion Plus TV* decided to terminate without explanation the work contracts of Arban Hasani, the news director of this station, and Mero Baze, the host of the programme Faktori+, which was later discontinued. According to a report, "*both Hasani and Baze, as well*

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as several journalism associations, claimed that this decision was made under government pressure, given the critical stance of Faktori+ and the critical editorial stance on the government adopted by the television station. The media company issued a statement that 'the insinuations were without arguments and insubstantial,' and that while legal aspects would be fully respected, 'business interests determine the guidelines of the company, including editorial activity.'⁵³

6.3

EDITORS AGAINST POLITICAL PARTIES: A FAILED BATTLE

Since 2009 one constant controversy surrounding electoral campaigns and the media has been the imposition of political parties on the media by sending their own broadcast material and footage to audiovisual media. In fact, according to the 2009 OSCE/ODIHR report on elections, campaign coverage was largely reduced to broadcasting footage and commentary provided by the political parties themselves.⁵⁴ Faced with this situation, a few of the main media outlets and their respective editors had already made public their decision not to accept such party-prepared footage for the 2013 elections. The editors and news directors of the main TV stations, such as *Top Channel TV*, *Ora News*, *ABC News*, *News 24*, etc., joined forces and declared that they would no longer accept tapes delivered by the parties to be broadcast as campaign coverage in their news editions. However, the determination to oppose such party practice did not last long, and some editors also reported that the political parties had refused to allow the TV cameras inside their rallies, leaving the TV stations with no choice but to broadcast what the party had sent, as footage engineered by the party itself, and not by an independent camera. Such attempts to break free from political coverage of elections were further cemented by a decision of the Central Elections Commission (CEC) which made it mandatory for commercial television operators to include in their news editions and special electoral campaign coverage footage prepared and supplied by the electoral subjects.⁵⁵ This decision of the CEC was condemned by the union of journalists and some media, and the People's Advocate advised the CEC to withdraw the decision, but this did not happen, and the decision is still in force. A similar attempt was made by several editors in the election of 2015,⁵⁶ especially aimed at refusing party-made broadcasts before the official date of the campaign, but the decision is still in force and attempts to refuse party tapes have been unsuccessful, in part because of the failure of television channels to stick together in this cause.

THE EDITORS AND NEWS DIRECTORS OF THE MAIN TV STATIONS, SUCH AS TOP CHANNEL TV, ORA NEWS, ABC NEWS, NEWS 24, ETC., JOINED FORCES AND DECLARED THAT THEY WOULD NO LONGER ACCEPT TAPES DELIVERED BY THE PARTIES TO BE BROADCAST AS CAMPAIGN COVERAGE IN THEIR NEWS EDITIONS.

53 Londo, "Albania," in *Media Integrity Matters*, 2014.

54 OSCE, ODIHR, *Republic of Albania – Parliamentary Elections 28 June 2009: OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report*, 14 September 2009.

55 Londo, "Albania," in *Media Integrity Matters*, 2014.

56 Karaj, "Transmetimi i fushatës, pse përçahen televizionet?" *Mapo*, 5 May 2015. Available at: <http://www.mapo.al/2015/05/televizionet-ne-prag-te-bojkotimit-te-fushates>. Accessed 5 May 2016.

The situation among editors of Albanian media largely reflects the dynamics of development of the Albanian media landscape through the years and is a mirror of the main challenges and successes of these media. Suffering from an informal and dysfunctional market, operating with reduced funds and staff against a background of economic crisis and a general print media crisis, the editors, while being partly responsible for the quality of media content produced, are also partly victims of the circumstances and nature of the market and other external factors affecting media development.

The in-depth interviews revealed a major trend towards a decline in the role of editors within Albanian media and their exertion of weaker influence, as the media owners and other figures, mainly politicians, seem to become more assertive. While conceding that editors are still the most privileged part of the newsroom, especially when compared to journalists and other media employees, still the tendency to retreat into self-censorship and to impose it on the newsroom seemed to be the most common characteristic that editors currently share. The fact that professional organisations of editors are lacking seems to be both a failure and a sign of low trust in such bodies. Although the legislation in general does affirm the main principles of freedom of expression, in practice such freedom has not developed into self-regulating mechanisms that would further promote professionalism and independence in the newsroom.

When asked to provide recommendations to improve the situation of editors and their independence in the newsroom, the interviewees responded frequently that the editors were considered a privileged class within the media community, and that it was journalists who needed greater protection. Similarly, such recommendations that came up were related to systemic changes, rather than to newsroom structures, with some of them suggesting that the whole media system would have to be “reinvented”:

1. Improving overall functionality of the media market, in such a way that media outlets can operate as businesses, and no longer as extensions of politics or business;
2. Improving labour relations and the economic situation of journalists, which would lead to better functioning newsrooms and reduce current workload;
3. Have clearly written and specified public editorial policy for media outlets, which the editor and newsroom can follow, and that will be transparent for the public, too.

WHILE CONCEDING THAT EDITORS ARE STILL THE MOST PRIVILEGED PART OF THE NEWSROOM, STILL THE TENDENCY TO RETREAT INTO SELF-CENSORSHIP AND TO IMPOSE IT ON THE NEWSROOM SEEMED TO BE THE MOST COMMON CHARACTERISTIC THAT EDITORS CURRENTLY SHARE.

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- Lutfi Dervishi, former editor, Tirana, 13 April 2016.
- Alfred Lela, director, *Mapo* newspaper, Tirana, 7 April 2016.
- Besar Likmeta, editor, BIRN, Tirana, 18 April 2016.
- Ornela Liperi, editor, *Monitor* magazine, Tirana, 10 April 2016.
- Lavdrim Lita, East Journal correspondent, Tirana, 11 April 2016.
- Iris Luarasi, professor of journalism, Tirana, 13 April 2016.
- Valbona Sulce, media expert, Tirana, 15 April 2016.
- Rrapo Zguri, professor of journalism, Tirana, 18 April 2016.
- Anonymous editor of a daily newspaper, Tirana, 25 March 2016.
- Anonymous editor of a daily newspaper, Tirana, 30 March 2016.
- Anonymous editor of a daily newspaper, Tirana, 7 April 2016.
- Anonymous editor of a daily newspaper, Tirana, 11 April 2016.

Anonymous editor of a daily newspaper, Tirana, 11 April 2016. (Note here please that interviews with two editors of daily newspapers who preferred to stay anonymous took place on the same date.)

Anonymous editor of a daily newspaper, Tirana, 13 April 2016.

Anonymous editor of a daily newspaper, Tirana, 18 April 2016.

Anonymous TV news editor, Tirana, 5 April 2016.

Anonymous TV news editor, Tirana, 9 April 2016.

Anonymous TV news editor, Tirana, 13 April 2016.

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DECLINE IN THE ROLE AND INFLUENCE OF EDITORS