

Regulation of the Media Environment in the Digital Age: An Examination of Innovative Tools and Practices Aligned with EU Standards _____

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Abstract

This paper examines the evolving regulation of the media environment in the digital age, focusing on innovative tools and practices aligned with European Union (EU) standards. The analysis underscores the dual challenge of safeguarding freedom of expression while addressing new risks such as disinformation, ownership concentration, and political interference. Drawing on the EU's regulatory instruments, including the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD), Digital Services Act (DSA), Digital Markets Act (DMA), General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), and the newly adopted European Media Freedom Act (EMFA), the paper highlights the EU's role as a normative leader in shaping democratic media governance. Particular emphasis is placed on Albania, a candidate country whose progress toward EU membership depends on aligning its media framework with European standards. The findings show that while Albania has made formal legislative advances, implementation and

enforcement remain weak, leaving journalists vulnerable to political and economic pressures. By situating Albania's case within broader European developments, the paper identifies regulatory innovations and self-regulatory practices essential for building a resilient, independent, and pluralistic media landscape in the digital era.

Keywords: Media Regulation, Digital Age, EU Standards, Media Freedom, Disinformation, Albania, EU Integration, Audiovisual Media Services Directive, Media Governance.

Introduction

The regulation of media in the digital age is central to safeguarding democratic values, balancing freedom of expression, and protecting society from emerging threats like disinformation and privacy violations. As information flows across digital platforms at unprecedented speed, the European Union (EU) plays a key role in setting standards to ensure media freedom, pluralism, and accountability. Through initiatives such as the European Media Freedom Act (2024), the EU aims to create an environment where both public and private media operate without undue influence.

For countries like Albania, which seeks EU membership, aligning its media regulations with EU standards is essential. While progress has been made in adopting the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (2018), challenges remain in implementing effective measures to protect media freedom and ensure independent journalism. The paper examines innovative regulatory practices within the EU framework and assesses Albania's efforts to modernize its media governance. By analyzing key policy documents and Albania's current legal landscape, the study identifies the challenges Albania faces in aligning its media laws with EU norms and highlights potential solutions to advance its European integration.

Self-regulation is necessary to strike a balance between freedom of expression, professional accountability, and protection from harms such as disinformation or privacy violations. The European Union (EU) recognizes free and pluralistic media as a fundamental element of democracy, while freedom of expression is enshrined as a core right and a key mechanism for holding power accountable (EU/Strategy and Policy/Priorities/A New Push for European Democracy, EC, 2024). By providing reliable information to the public, independent media help citizens make informed decisions and play a significant role in combating disinformation and manipulating democratic debate. Therefore, through various acts, such as the European Media Freedom Act (European Commission, 2024), adopted in May 2024, the EU seeks to create an environment where both public and private media can operate freely and without undue pressure.

In the digital age, traditional media codes are challenged by online platforms and the unprecedented speed at which false information can spread. This has made the regulation of the media environment more important and challenging than ever before, requiring innovative approaches that support open discourse while addressing the new threats emerging from these challenges. The EU has taken an active role in setting media standards and guidelines for member states and candidate countries, positioning itself as a normative leader in media policy. Through directives and action plans, the EU promotes media freedom, pluralism, and independent oversight in alignment with democratic values.

The issue of media environment regulation is particularly important for countries like Albania, which aspires to join the EU and therefore needs to align its regulatory framework with EU standards. To become an EU member state, Albania must comply with EU standards in various areas that aid in building democratic, well-functioning, and sustainable institutions. The EU's enlargement policy sets conditions and rules for membership, negotiated individually, such as Chapter 10 of the "*Acquis Communautaire*" concerning the Information Society and Media, which includes specific rules for audiovisual services and broadcasting, as well as Chapter 23 on the Judiciary and Fundamental Rights, which addresses freedom of expression, including media freedom and pluralism (EU/Enlargement/Conditions for Membership, n.d.).

Albania has been somewhat unprepared for ensuring freedom of expression, and its legal and institutional framework is partially aligned with European standards. Progress has been made in aligning with the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (European Commission, 2018), and steps have been taken regarding measures to guarantee the free exercise of journalistic profession. However, it is recommended that formal and protective measures be effectively implemented to ensure that they become part of journalists' daily routines (European Commission, 2023). EU institutions have made it clear that progress in the accession process may be delayed or blocked if candidate countries adopt media laws that conflict with European norms. Therefore, examining innovative regulatory tools and practices—particularly those in line with EU standards—is crucial for informing Albania's efforts to modernize its media governance in the digital age. This chapter provides an overview of media regulation instruments, analyzes key institutional and policy documents, aiming to identify the main challenges and innovative practices for regulating the media environment within the context of the country's European integration.

Theoretical Framework: Europeanization and Media Regulation

Europeanization has emerged as a central analytical framework for understanding how the European Union (EU) shapes democratic institutions, policies, and political cultures. Radaelli (2003) defines Europeanization as the “process of construction, diffusion, and institutionalization of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, ways of doing things, and shared beliefs and norms” that originate at the EU level and are subsequently incorporated in the domestic context (p.30). This definition highlights both the normative and institutional dimensions of EU influence. The theory has been particularly salient in analyzing the reforms undertaken by candidate countries, where EU conditionality acts as the primary mechanism driving policy change (Schimmelfenning & Sedelmeier, 2005).

In the media sector, Europeanization manifests most clearly in the transposition of EU directives and regulations, such as the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD), the Digital Services Acts (DSA), and the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA). These instruments articulate not only market-oriented rules but also democratic norms, such as editorial independence, media pluralism, and transparency and ownership. AS Harcourt (2002) argues, the EU has become a “policy entrepreneur” in media governance, promoting both liberalization of markets and protection of democratic values. This dual role reflects the EU’s position as a normative power (Manners, 2002), exporting standards that go beyond technical regulation to embed principles of democracy and fundamental rights in national frameworks.

Yet, Europeanization theory also anticipates the risk of decoupling between formal compliance and practical implementation. Richter and Wunsch (2019) demonstrate how many Western Balkan countries adopt EU-compatible laws while simultaneously experiencing democratic backsliding, a phenomenon rooted in state capture and weak enforcement. This paradox of legal alignment without substantive reform is particularly visible in Albania’s media sector. On paper, Albania has incorporated EU norms into its legislation – aligning its audiovisual media law with the AVMSD, and engaging in preparatory discussions for the DSA and EMFA. In practice, however, regulatory bodies such as the Audiovisual Media Authority (AMA) remain vulnerable to political influence, media ownership is highly concentrated, and journalists face economic precarity and intimidation.

Applying Europeanization theory to Albania’s case therefore clarifies the tension between formal Europeanization and substantive democratization. It reveals that while conditionality has driven legal reforms, entrenched patronage networks and institutional weakness hinder genuine internationalization of EU norms. For the

U, this gap underscores the need to treat enlargement conditionality not merely as a checklist of legislative transposition but as a mechanism that also fosters enforcement, independence of regulators, and cultural change within media institutions. For Albania, Europeanization provides a framework to modernize its media environment, but only when paired with domestic reforms that address political capture and safeguard journalists can these norms be effectively implemented.

Methodology and Analytical Model

This study adopts a qualitative policy review methodology, combining legal-document analysis with secondary literature review. The objective is to evaluate Albania's progress in aligning its media framework with EU standards and to identify the extent of substantive versus superficial compliance.

Primary sources include EU legal instruments and regulations, such as the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD), Digital Services Act (DSA), Digital Markets Act (DMA), General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), and the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA) (European Convention, 2016, 2018, 2022a, 2022b, 2024). These were assessed alongside accession-related documents, notably the European Commission's 2023 and 2024 reports on Albania (European Commission, 2023, 2024a). At the national level, analysis focused on Albania's Law on Audiovisual Media, the Law on the Right to Information, provisions in the Penal Code, and other relevant acts governing data protection, electronic communications, and whistleblowing (Assembly of the Republic of Albania, 1998, 2008, 2013, 2016, 2023; QBZ, 2017).

Self-regulatory instruments were also examined, particularly the Albanian Media Institute's Code of Ethics (2018), to evaluate professional accountability mechanisms and their role in complementing formal regulation.

Secondary sources included scholarly literature, NGO assessments, and international monitoring reports. Key among these were publications from Freedom House (2022), Reporters Without Borders (2023, 2024), the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (2022), and the U.S. Department of State (2022). These sources provide comparative data on media freedom, pluralism, and journalist safety, situating Albania within regional and European trends.

The comparative dimension of the methodology is particularly relevant. Albania's media framework was juxtaposed with EU standards and selected member state practices, such as those in France, Germany, and the Nordic countries, to highlight divergences and potential pathways for reform. This comparative lens underscores the influence of EU conditionality and reveals the domestic obstacles that impede substantive compliance.

By triangulating legal texts, policy reports, and monitoring assessments, this methodology ensures a comprehensive understanding of Albania's media environment in the digital age. It also enables the analysis to distinguish between formal legal transposition of EU directives and the actual implementation of safeguards necessary for a free, pluralistic, and independent media system.

This study hypothesizes that formally aligning Albania's media regulation framework with EU standards, combined with robust domestic implementation, will lead to measurable improvements in media freedom. EU conditionality makes media reform a central criterion for accession, but genuine progress depends not only on transposing EU directives but also on ensuring independent enforcement and reducing political interference (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005; Richter & Wunsch, 2019).

The analytical model conceptualizes **media freedom** as the dependent variable, shaped by four main independent variables:

1. **Legal alignment** – the extent to which Albanian legislation reflects EU acquis (e.g., AVMSD, EMFA).
2. **Regulator independence** – the capacity of institutions such as the Audiovisual Media Authority (AMA) to operate free from political capture.
3. **Political interference** – pressures from state advertising, censorship, or partisan influence over editorial content.
4. **Self-regulation capacity** – the strength of professional codes of ethics and voluntary compliance within the journalistic community.

These relationships are mediated by two key factors. EU conditionality functions as an external incentive structure, encouraging reforms through accession rewards, while civil society oversight provides bottom-up monitoring and advocacy to ensure compliance with European standards (Börzel & Risse, 2012).

Normatively, the model assumes that stronger legal and institutional alignment with EU norms, when coupled with reduced political interference and enhanced self-regulation, will foster an independent and pluralistic media environment. Conversely, weak enforcement and politicized institutions risk producing only superficial compliance, leaving journalists vulnerable and undermining democratic consolidation.

This framework guides the subsequent analysis of Albania's media environment, assessing the extent to which EU-driven reforms have translated into substantive improvements in media freedom.

Analysis: The EU Legal Framework for Media

The European Union has developed a comprehensive legal framework to regulate the media environment, aiming to ensure media freedom, transparency, pluralism, and security in both traditional and digital media. This framework reflects the commitment to democratic values, the public interest, and adaptability to technological advancements that continue to reshape the media landscape. At the core of EU media policy is the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, which enshrines freedom of expression, media freedom, and pluralism as fundamental rights that apply across all member states. Article 11 of the Charter safeguards these freedoms by protecting against censorship and excessive concentration of media ownership, which could limit media diversity (European Convention, 2000).

The Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD) (European Convention, 2018), initially introduced in 2010 and revised in 2018, serves as a cornerstone for regulating audiovisual media within the EU. It governs television broadcasting and on-demand services, setting standards for advertising, cultural content diversity, accessibility, and the protection of minors. The 2018 revision further expanded its scope to include video-sharing platforms, requiring them to responsibly manage harmful content, hate speech, and violent material. The directive also supports media literacy initiatives aimed at fostering critical engagement by EU citizens with media content (AVMSD, 2018).

In addition to traditional media regulation, the EU addresses digital challenges through the Digital Services Act (DSA), adopted in 2022 (European Convention, 2022a). It imposes obligations on online platforms and digital services regarding transparent content moderation, accountability, and the prevention of illegal or harmful material. The largest platforms, referred to as “Very Large Online Platforms” (VLOPs) (European Commission, 2022a), are subject to stricter accountability measures due to their significant impact on public debate. The DSA balances freedom of expression with the need to protect users from disinformation and other harmful content. The Digital Markets Act (DMA) (European Convention, 2022b), adopted to complement the DSA, aims to maintain fair competition in the digital economy by targeting “gatekeeper” platforms that control access to essential digital services. The DMA ensures equal access for smaller media companies and prevents dominant platforms from favoring their own content, thus supporting media diversity by creating equal conditions for small and independent media.

In 2024, the EU proposed the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA) (European Convention, 2024), which focuses on safeguarding editorial independence, media pluralism, and transparency in media ownership. The EMFA aims to prevent

political interference by ensuring that media ownership is transparent and that state advertising practices are fair and free from biased influence. It also seeks to protect the media from dependency on government funding, promoting independence across the sector.

Data protection also plays a crucial role in the EU's media framework, particularly through the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (European Convention, 2016). Although not specifically focused on the media, the GDPR sets high standards for privacy and data security, influencing how media companies manage personal data. By protecting users' data and requiring consent for its collection, the GDPR strengthens trust between the media and their audiences.

Another operational tool of the EU's approach is the Code of Practice on Disinformation (CPD) (European Commission, 2022), created in 2018 and improved in 2022. This self-regulatory framework encourages online platforms, social networks, and media organizations to combat disinformation through transparent content moderation and fact-checking. Although initially voluntary, the EU aims to integrate the principles of the Code into broader regulations, including the DSA, to hold platforms accountable for failing to manage disinformation, particularly during election periods.

Although not directly part of EU legislation, the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) (Council of Europe, 1950) and the standards of the Council of Europe influence member states by providing guidance on protecting media freedom and the safety of journalists. Article 10 of the ECHR protects freedom of expression, while the Council of Europe's Platform for the Protection of Journalism and the Safety of Journalists (Council of Europe, n.d., Platform) supports journalists facing threats or harassment. These standards strengthen EU media laws by ensuring that media professionals can work safely and freely across the EU.

Finally, EU competition law (European Commission, n.d., Competition Policy) supports media pluralism by regulating mergers and acquisitions in the media sector. By reviewing such transactions, the EU seeks to prevent excessive concentration of ownership, thereby maintaining a diverse media environment in which the public has access to a range of viewpoints. Through this legal framework, the EU aims to create a balanced and sustainable media environment that guarantees freedom of expression, protects citizens from harmful content, and promotes a pluralistic media landscape. This framework reinforces democratic values by ensuring the public has access to a transparent, independent, and diverse media environment, free from political or corporate influences.

Overall, it could be summarized that EU has a multi-level approach for media governance:

- Content regulation (AVMSD, DSA).
- Market fairness (DMA, competition law).

- Rights protection (Charter, GDPR, ECHR).
- Pluralism and independence safeguards (EMFA, CPD).

This framework reflects the EU's role as a normative power, setting conditions not only for member states but also for candidate countries. For Albania, alignment with this *acquis* is both a technical requirement for accession and a political test of its democratic consolidation.

Albanian Case Analysis: Media Regulation and Europeanization in Practice

In the following sections the paper takes into analyses the multi-level approach of EU to evaluate the degree of success and what areas need improvement.

Legal Alignment – The Extent to Which Albanian Legislation Reflects EU Acquis

Albania's aspirations to join the European Union require a regulatory framework that aligns with EU standards on media freedom, independence, and pluralism. The European Media Freedom Act (EMFA) is central to this goal, as it sets minimum standards for transparency, editorial independence, and pluralism that Albania must achieve to make tangible progress toward EU membership (European Commission, 2024).

The Albanian media environment is currently structured by a series of laws and regulations designed to guarantee freedom of expression, press independence, and accountability. At the constitutional level, the Republic of Albania enshrines these rights explicitly. The Constitution (Assembly of the Republic of Albania, 1998) establishes the rights to freedom of expression, press freedom, and access to information. These rights, however, are not absolute. They can be restricted when necessary to protect the public interest or the rights of others, provided that such restrictions remain proportionate and consistent with international standards.

A cornerstone of the legislative framework is Law No. 30/2013, "On Audiovisual Media in the Republic of Albania," and its subsequent amendments (Assembly of the Republic of Albania, 2013 [2023]). This law regulates television and radio broadcasters, creating the Audiovisual Media Authority (AMA) as the primary body responsible for licensing, setting content standards, and overseeing ownership transparency. The law also seeks to prevent monopolistic practices and to safeguard pluralism in the media sector. The importance of this legislation lies in its dual function: it provides the formal regulatory framework while also serving as the instrument through which EU directives, such as the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD), are transposed into national law.

Transparency in governance is further promoted by Law No. 119/2014, “On the Right to Information,” which grants citizens the right to access documents and information held by public authorities. This law has been especially relevant for investigative journalists monitoring government accountability and spending. Despite its significance, criticisms persist that certain exemptions in the law are used to obstruct public interest reporting, thereby diluting its effectiveness in practice.

Albania has also introduced specific legislation to support whistleblowers. Law No. 60/2016, “On Whistleblowing and Whistleblower Protection,” amended in 2020, is designed to protect individuals, including journalists, who disclose corruption, abuse of power, or other unlawful activity (Parliament of the Republic of Albania, 2016 [2020]). This law strengthens investigative journalism by providing safeguards against retaliation.

The country’s regulatory tradition also includes older frameworks, notably Law No. 8410/1998, “On Public and Private Radio and Television in the Republic of Albania.” Although much of its scope has been replaced by Law No. 97/2013 (Parliament of the Republic of Albania, 2013), some provisions remain relevant, particularly in areas not fully addressed by the newer audiovisual legislation.

Beyond sector-specific laws, the Penal Code of the Republic of Albania plays an important role in shaping the environment for media freedom. Its provisions on defamation, hate speech, and incitement to violence directly affect journalists. While defamation was decriminalized in 2012, civil defamation lawsuits with heavy financial penalties continue to threaten investigative reporting, serving as a deterrent against robust journalistic activity (Bino, 2022, p. 16). Privacy issues are covered by Law No. 9887/2008, “On the Protection of Personal Data,” which outlines standards for data collection, storage, and dissemination. For journalists, this law requires balancing individual privacy rights with the public’s right to information. In parallel, the digital domain is governed by Law No. 9918/2008, “On Electronic Communications,” administered by the Electronic and Postal Communications Authority. Although this law establishes standards for internet use, it does not include explicit provisions on online media content or ownership transparency, leaving significant gaps in the governance of Albania’s increasingly digital media environment.

Efforts to modernize Albania’s media legislation continue, particularly with respect to alignment with the EU acquis. In 2023, amendments were introduced to the Law on Audiovisual Media to further align with Directive (EU) 2018/1808. These reforms address a broad range of issues, including protection of minors, accessibility for people with special needs, ownership transparency, and the introduction of co-regulatory and self-regulatory measures in areas such as media literacy and content moderation. Once fully implemented, these updates are expected to bring Albania closer to the standards required by the EU.

Regulation also occurs at the level of the Audiovisual Media Authority itself, which issues specific guidelines such as the Broadcasting Code. This Code defines standards for advertising, content, and electoral coverage. It is designed to promote fair and balanced reporting, particularly during election campaigns, and to mitigate the influence of political actors on media content (AMA, 2023).

Despite this extensive body of laws and reforms, challenges remain in translating formal provisions into practice. The European Commission's 2024 Report on Albania emphasized that "no progress has been made in aligning the legal framework with EU *acquis* and European standards, including the Media Freedom Act" (European Commission, 2024). Notably, defamation remains a criminal offense in practice, and civil provisions concerning misinformation are not yet harmonized with European norms. Additionally, the Penal Code continues to lack strong protections for journalists against violence, harassment, or intimidation.

Legal uncertainties extend to source protection as well. Article 159 of the Criminal Procedure Code establishes journalists' right not to disclose their sources of information, treating it as a professional secret. However, the same article allows courts to compel disclosure if the information is considered essential to proving a criminal act and cannot be established otherwise (QBZ, 2017). The European Commission (2024) has urged Albania to align these provisions more closely with EU standards and Venice Commission recommendations, noting that weak source protection undermines journalistic independence.

Finally, deficiencies in company ownership transparency, particularly in the online media sector, remain problematic. The Law on Audiovisual Media provides only partial safeguards against monopolies and lacks clear rules on the distribution of public sector advertising. The absence of robust ownership disclosure requirements enables circumvention of transparency standards, often through subcontracting arrangements (Parliament of the Republic of Albania, 2013 [2023]). Compared to EU member states such as Germany or the Netherlands, where ownership disclosure is rigorously enforced, Albania lags considerably behind (Council of Europe, 2022).

Thus, Albania has established a comprehensive legal framework that formally reflects key EU instruments such as the AVMSD and the EMFA. However, gaps in enforcement, persistent criminalization of defamation, weak protections for journalists, and insufficient ownership transparency highlight the distance still to be covered. This dynamic illustrates a broader Europeanization paradox: while Albania has transposed significant portions of the *acquis* into national law, substantive compliance remains weak, resulting in formal rather than functional convergence with EU media standards.

Regular Independence – Institutional Capacity and Autonomy

An essential dimension of Albania's media regulation within the Europeanization framework concerns the independence and effectiveness of its regulatory institutions, most notably the Audiovisual Media Authority (AMA). Created under Law No. 30/2013 "On Audiovisual Media in the Republic of Albania" (Assembly of the Republic of Albania, 2013 [2023]), AMA is formally tasked with overseeing licensing, enforcing content standards, and ensuring transparency in media ownership. It is also responsible for implementing national regulations in alignment with EU directives such as the AVMSD. In theory, this design positions AMA as a cornerstone of Albania's transition toward EU-compliant media governance. In practice, however, AMA has struggled to function as an autonomous regulator, with its authority undermined by political capture and weak institutional capacity.

The independence of AMA has been repeatedly called into question. In 2021, the appointment of board members through a partisan selection process damaged public perceptions of its neutrality and highlighted its vulnerability to political interference (European Commission, 2024a). Once in office, the body has frequently been criticized for failing to regulate media ownership concentration or for enforcing standards on fair competition. Reports by Reporters Without Borders (RSF, 2024) point to AMA's limited effectiveness in addressing market concentration, leaving large media conglomerates with close ties to political and economic elites largely unchecked. These deficiencies undermine the regulator's role as a safeguard of pluralism and highlight a significant gap between Albania's formal alignment with EU legislation and its substantive compliance with EU standards.

By comparison, EU member states such as France and Ireland provide instructive examples of more robust regulatory independence. France's Conseil supérieur de l'audiovisuel (CSA), restructured into ARCOM, and Ireland's newly created Coimisiún na Meán have built credibility through transparent appointment processes, clear accountability mechanisms, and parliamentary oversight (Harcourt, 2022). These measures enhance regulators' autonomy and legitimacy, enabling them to intervene effectively in cases of ownership concentration, political interference, or breaches of content standards. In contrast, AMA's susceptibility to political capture highlights the persistence of Albania's institutional weakness and its inability to replicate the substantive independence that characterizes EU best practices.

This divergence underscores a key theme of Albania's Europeanization process: while transposition of EU legislation into national law has taken place, implementation is compromised by the fragility of domestic institutions. The

European Commission (2024a) has repeatedly emphasized that regulatory independence is a prerequisite for EU membership, urging reforms that depoliticize appointment procedures and strengthen institutional safeguards for autonomy. However, despite consistent recommendations, little substantive progress has been made, and AMA remains constrained by partisan politics and limited resources.

The lack of regulator independence has wide-reaching consequences. It hampers efforts to ensure pluralism, prevents fair oversight of state advertising distribution, and undermines media market competition. Furthermore, AMA's inability to enforce rules uniformly exacerbates public distrust in both the media sector and regulatory institutions. These failures align with broader scholarly observations on Europeanization in candidate states, where domestic institutions often adopt the formal structures required by the EU but fail to implement them effectively, producing what Richter and Wunsch (2019) describe as a "decoupling effect" between formal compliance and substantive practice.

In conclusion, while Albania has established the legal and institutional structures of a media regulator in line with EU models, the independence of AMA remains compromised by political capture, lack of transparency in appointments, and limited enforcement capacity. This institutional weakness highlights one of the central barriers to Albania's full convergence with EU media standards and represents a crucial area where reforms are required if Albania is to credibly advance in its EU accession process.

Political Interference – State Influence, Censorship, and Market Capture

One of the most persistent challenges facing Albania's media environment is the extent of political interference in the sector. Despite constitutional guarantees of freedom of the press (Articles 22 & 23 of the Constitution of the Republic of Albania, 1998), the reality is that structural pressures undermine media pluralism, compromise journalistic independence, and erode public trust.

State advertising remains one of the primary mechanisms of political influence. Reports by Freedom House (2022), the U.S. Department of State (2022), and the European Commission (2024a) confirm that government advertising is distributed selectively to media outlets that adopt favorable editorial lines, thereby creating structural financial dependencies. Investigations by the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (Kurtic & Mastracci, 2023) document how political and economic interests are deeply intertwined, shaping editorial policies in ways that limit critical journalism and reinforce partisan narratives. This pattern stands in sharp contrast to EU member states such as Sweden and Denmark, where strict rules on state aid and independent oversight of public broadcasting ensure neutrality, limit political capture, and reinforce pluralism (Council of Europe, 1950).

Censorship, both direct and indirect, also remains a problem. After the 2022 cyberattack on Albania's police systems, the authorities restricted the publication of leaked documents, an action that led to accusations of censorship and highlighted the government's willingness to limit access to sensitive information. Similarly, smear campaigns, harassment, and intimidation against journalists are widely reported. According to the European Commission's 2024 Report, journalist safety is increasingly threatened, with growing instances of verbal and physical assaults, discrediting campaigns, and retaliatory lawsuits. Reporters Without Borders (2023, 2024) underscores that these pressures push many journalists toward self-censorship, especially given the lack of effective legal protections.

Media ownership concentration further compounds the issue of political interference. The European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF, 2022) noted during a field visit that powerful business groups with close ties to political elites exercise significant influence over the sector, thereby undermining impartiality and pluralism. Similarly, the U.S. Department of State (2022) condemned the overlap of political and commercial interests, observing that such entanglements distort editorial independence and weaken journalistic accountability. Ownership transparency remains weak, with Albania receiving a high-risk score of 81% in the Media Pluralism Monitor (European University Institute, 2024). By contrast, EU member states such as Germany and the Netherlands rigorously enforce disclosure requirements, thereby ensuring greater transparency and accountability (Council of Europe, 2022).

The effects of political interference are particularly pronounced during electoral periods. Reports by the Audiovisual Media Authority (AMA, 2023) and international observers note that campaign coverage often favors incumbents, reflecting the influence of both state advertising and regulatory weaknesses. The failure to guarantee equitable coverage during elections undermines democratic processes and highlights the urgent need for reform.

The overlapping pressures of state influence, censorship, and ownership concentration contribute to a climate where self-censorship is widespread. Journalists facing precarious working conditions, including unpaid wages, lack of contracts, and dismissals, are particularly vulnerable to political pressure (European Commission, 2024; U.S. Department of State, 2022). In 2023, 26 labor complaints were filed with the State Labor Inspectorate, and over 140 journalists were dismissed from the public broadcaster between June 2023 and June 2024. Such conditions reduce the independence of the press and further entrench political control over media narratives.

Overall, Albania's media sector demonstrates a recurring pattern: formal guarantees of freedom are undermined in practice by systemic political interference. State advertising is used as a tool of influence, ownership concentration entrenches political-economic alliances, and censorship—whether through

lawsuits, intimidation, or direct restrictions—weakens journalistic independence. Compared with EU member states where robust safeguards limit state influence, Albania lags significantly behind, underscoring the gap between formal legislative alignment and substantive democratic practice.

Self-Regulation Capacity – Professional Norms and Voluntary Compliance

In addition to formal legal frameworks and regulatory bodies, self-regulation plays a central role in safeguarding journalistic integrity and accountability in democratic societies. In Albania, self-regulation is formally anchored in the Albanian Media Institute's (AMI) Code of Ethics for Journalists (2018), which establishes standards for accuracy, fairness, transparency, and respect for privacy. The Code emphasizes the responsibility of journalists to verify facts, distinguish between news and opinion, and protect confidential sources except when overriding public interest demands disclosure. It further discourages sensationalism, prohibits hate speech, and underscores the importance of editorial independence and professional solidarity. Exceptions to these ethical standards are allowed only in extraordinary circumstances, such as public health emergencies or the prevention of serious crimes.

Despite its comprehensiveness, the impact of the AMI's Code has been limited by the voluntary nature of compliance. Many journalists, particularly those working for the over 900 online news portals that dominate Albania's digital landscape, often disregard these principles. Reports by the European Commission (2024a) and the European Journalism Observatory (2023) emphasize that sensationalist practices, clickbait headlines, and the unchecked spread of disinformation remain pervasive, undermining journalistic credibility and public trust. Weak adherence to ethical standards also reflects the structural fragility of Albania's self-regulatory culture, where the lack of institutional enforcement mechanisms leaves compliance to individual or editorial discretion.

Comparisons with EU member states highlight Albania's shortcomings. In countries such as Finland and Austria, self-regulatory councils enjoy stronger institutional backing, higher levels of public trust, and greater participation from both journalists and media outlets (Council of Europe, 2022). These councils are integrated into national media systems and often collaborate with regulators to ensure adherence to ethical standards, thereby creating a more robust framework of accountability. In contrast, Albania's fragmented media environment, combined with political polarization and economic dependence, weakens the authority and effectiveness of self-regulatory institutions.

The weakness of self-regulation in Albania is further compounded by limited financial and organizational resources. The Alliance for Ethical Journalism, which seeks to monitor compliance with ethical standards across online and traditional

outlets, faces significant resource constraints that reduce its ability to function effectively (U.S. Department of State, 2022). As a result, enforcement of ethical codes is sporadic and uneven, leaving room for partisan narratives, commercial influence, and disinformation to thrive unchecked.

Journalistic working conditions also directly affect self-regulatory capacity. High levels of job insecurity, lack of legally enforceable contracts, and frequent dismissals reduce journalists' willingness to resist external pressures or adhere strictly to ethical standards (European Commission, 2024a; U.S. Department of State, 2022). In 2023 alone, 26 complaints regarding unpaid wages, overtime, and unfair dismissals were filed with the State Labor Inspectorate, while more than 140 journalists were dismissed from the public broadcaster between June 2023 and June 2024. These conditions foster a culture of self-censorship and compromise journalists' ability to adhere to professional codes, especially when doing so may expose them to political or economic retaliation.

Ultimately, Albania's self-regulatory framework illustrates a significant gap between normative aspirations and practical implementation. While the existence of a detailed Code of Ethics provides a foundation for professional standards, weak voluntary compliance, insufficient institutional support, and precarious labor conditions undermine its effectiveness. Compared with EU member states where self-regulation is institutionalized and widely respected, Albania's fragmented and resource-constrained system struggles to provide meaningful accountability. Without stronger institutional backing, greater journalist participation, and improved working conditions, self-regulation in Albania risks remaining largely symbolic rather than a functional safeguard of media integrity.

Overall, the media landscape in Albania faces political influence, economic pressures, and inadequate protections for journalists. While a legal framework exists, deeper improvements are needed to truly guarantee media independence. EU conditionality remains a key driver of reforms. The European Commission's 2024 report explicitly links Albania's accession progress to reforms on decriminalizing defamation, strengthening regulator independence, and protecting journalists (European Commission, 2024a). However, compliance is often formal rather than substantive, confirming Europeanization's "decoupling" effect (Richter & Wunsch, 2019). Civil society organizations, such as the Albanian Helsinki Committee (2024) and BIRN (Kurtic & Mastracci, 2023), provide oversight and advocacy, but their capacity is constrained by limited resources and political polarization. By contrast, in EU states, stronger networks between NGOs, regulators, and media councils create a more robust accountability ecosystem (Börzel & Risse, 2012; Harcourt, 2002).

Conclusion: Towards a Resilient and Independent Media Environment

Albania's case illustrates the paradox of Europeanization: legal frameworks aligned with EU standards exist, yet enforcement and institutional independence remain fragile. Political capture, opaque ownership, and weak self-regulation hinder substantive progress (RSF, 2023, 2024; European Commission, 2024a). For Albania, reforms must prioritize strengthening regulator independence, decriminalizing defamation, ensuring transparent ownership, and improving working conditions for journalists (Freedom House, 2022; U.S. Department of State, 2022).

For the EU, Albania underscores the need to go beyond checklist conditionality. Enlargement policy should focus not only on legislative harmonization but also on ensuring practices that protect journalists, foster pluralism, and counter disinformation (Manners, 2002; Radaelli, 2003). Safeguarding media freedom in the digital age requires combining regulation with self-regulation, enhancing media literacy, and addressing systemic risks from digital platforms (European Commission, 2022; European Convention, 2022a, 2022b).

Ultimately, Albania's trajectory reflects the broader European struggle to uphold democratic media in the digital era. Success will depend on whether Europeanization translates beyond formal legal transposition into meaningful protections for pluralism and journalistic independence (Richter & Wunsch, 2019; RSF, 2024).

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