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PROMOTING EU STANDARDS OF MEDIA FREEDOM, DEMOCRACY AND SELF-REGULATION IN ALBANIA

Prof. Dr. Belina **BUDINI**/ Prof.Dr. Endirë **BUSHATI**/ Ph.D. (c). Armand **BRAHO**/
Assoc. Prof. Juela **LAMÇE**/ Assoc. Prof. Fabian **ZHILLA**/ Msc. Anxhela **FERHATAJ**/
Ph.D. (c). Dritan **IDRIZI**/ PhD(c). Erisela **MARKO**/ Ph.D. (c). Jan **NIEMIEC**/
Armela **KRASNIQI**/ Prof. Dr. Gjergj **SINANI**

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PROMOTING EU STANDARDS OF MEDIA FREEDOM, DEMOCRACY AND SELF-REGULATION IN ALBANIA

PROEUMEDAL by Jean Monnet Chair, Prof. Dr. Belina Budini, on Media and European Studies

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EDITORIAL

Regulation of the Media Environment in the Digital Age: An Examination of Innovative Tools and Practices Aligned with EU Standards¹

Belina BUDINI

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9374-4812>

JEAN MONNET CHAIR, PROEUMEDAL, 2024-2027

Albania's progress toward European Union accession is inseparable from the way its media system adapts to digital transformations and aligns with EU standards. Media as infrastructures of democracy shape public discourse, influence political legitimacy, and affect citizens' capacity to participate. This special issue of *Polis Journal* addresses how media innovation, regulation, and self-regulation intersect with Albania's integration process, grounding the discussion in current policy projects and empirical research.

The contributions demonstrate both advances and persistent weaknesses. The study on technology-driven data journalism introduces tools for monitoring narratives, innovation, and online diffusion, showing how transparency and accountability can be embedded into newsroom practice. Yet it also identifies Albania's underrepresentation in global misinformation detection systems, highlighting the need for locally adapted and GDPR-compliant solutions.

The legal analyses assess the implications of the European Media Freedom Act, underlining gaps in ownership transparency, state advertising, and editorial independence. Empirical work reveals that prime-time news and youth media use reflect optimism toward the EU, but also narrow sourcing and susceptibility

¹ This editorial issue was conducted with the support of AKKSHI through the PKKSH program for the year 2024

to misinformation. Policy reviews from the Audiovisual Media Authority show partial alignment with EU directives but underline the difficulty of regulating online platforms. The final article examines external influences, philosophical perspectives on European values, adding further depth to the debate.

These academic contributions are reinforced by institutional projects at the Faculty of Humanities, Education and Liberal Arts at European University of Tirana. The Jean Monnet Chair PROEUMEDAL (2024–2027) is reforming curricula, promoting comparative research, and convening policy dialogue to strengthen self-regulation and pluralism. In parallel, the AKKSHI-funded project on media regulation in the digital age investigates innovation mechanisms and self-regulation on the part of the media, aiming to produce research and policy-relevant recommendations and measurable outputs. Together, these initiatives provide an institutional framework that links research with teaching and policymaking.

The findings point to clear priorities. Regulators must build capacity and independence while ensuring that EU norms are not only transposed but implemented. Academia should expand policy-relevant curricula and research. Newsrooms need to adopt transparent verification practices and embrace self-regulation as professional culture. Civil society must promote media literacy and demand pluralism.

Albania's integration into the EU will not be decided by legislation alone. It will depend on whether classrooms, newsrooms, regulators, and civil society embed transparency, innovation, and pluralism in daily practice. The work presented here shows pathways for that transformation, offering evidence and tools for policymakers and practitioners committed to aligning Albania's media with European standards.

Media Pluralism in Albania and the Alignment of National Legislation with Emfa – Legal Analysis

Endirë BUSHATI

INSTITUTE OF EUROPEAN STUDIES
UNIVERSITY OF TIRANA
E-mail: endira.bushati@unitir.edu.al

Armand BRAHO

UNIVERSITY FAN S. NOLI KORÇË
E-mail: a_braho@yahoo.com

Abstract

In April 2024, the European Commission adopted the European Media Freedom Act, a new regulatory framework designed to safeguard media pluralism and independence across the EU. The regulation addresses key concerns such as media concentration, transparency in media ownership, the distribution of state advertising, and the sustainable funding and editorial independence of public service media. It also introduces mechanisms to disclose conflicts of interest and reinforce protections against political or economic interference.

In the context of Albania, this new legal framework gains particular relevance. Sixteen years after signing the Stabilisation and Association Agreement in 2006, Albania officially opened EU accession negotiations in July 2022 a significant milestone in its European integration path. However, according to the European Commission's annual reports, Albania remains at a moderate level of preparation in the area of freedom of expression and media independence, which is part of the first cluster chapter on fundamental rights.

The Albanian media landscape continues to face systemic challenges, including political and business interference, media concentration, lack of financial transparency, and limited independence of regulatory authorities. The proposed regulation addresses the issue of media concentration and focuses on the independence and sustainable funding of public service media, as well as transparency regarding media ownership and the distribution of state advertising.

Keywords: Freedom, Media Ownership, Pluralism.

Introduction

As a cornerstone of democratic societies founded on respect for human rights, freedom of expression includes the individual's right to receive and impart information and guarantees the media's ability to access and disseminate information thereby strengthening state accountability. The "privileged" position of the media in a democratic state is guaranteed precisely because in fact it makes state power more accountable, more transparent and more accessible to citizens, as well as enables oversight and judgment on how public authority is exercised and how public funds are managed.

Freedom of expression is addressed in Article 22 of the Constitution of the Republic of Albania, which also guarantees the freedom of the press, radio, and television. Also point 3 of this article stipulates the prohibition of prior censorship of communication means. Point 4 also provides that law may require authorization for the operation of television or radio stations.

Likewise, Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights stipulates that the freedom of expression guaranteed by the article does not prevent the state from requiring the licensing of television.

Meanwhile the written press in Albania has not faced restrictions, several legal attempts have been made to regulate the audiovisual media market. 26 years after the first media law, the audiovisual media market in our country, even after the transition to digital broadcasting, continues to be dominated by informality, non-implementation of the law, and a monopoly situation. The factors contributing to this situation are many, but the later clientelist ties of television channels with political parties, a weak regulatory authority often under strong political and operator pressure, are among them.

Sixteen years after the signing of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement in 2006, in July 2022, negotiations between EU and the Albania were officially opened.

In the 2024 Annual Report for Albania, the European Commission, in its assessment of freedom of expression as part of fundamental rights (Cluster 1),

¹emphasizes that Albania is between a certain level of preparation and a moderate level of preparation in the area of freedom of expression and has made no progress during the reporting period. The independence and pluralism of the media continued to be affected by high market concentration, overlapping business and political interests, lack of transparency in funding sources, high media ownership concentration, intimidation, and insecure working conditions for journalists. According to the Report, Albania should:

- Adopt amendments to the legal framework in order to:
 - (i) increase transparency in media ownership,
 - (ii) fully decriminalize defamation and align civil aspects of defamation with European standards, based on a structured and inclusive dialogue with media stakeholders.
- Ensure zero tolerance for intimidation and effective judicial prosecution of cases of attacks against journalists; guarantee the strengthening of the capacities of law enforcement bodies to address cases of violence, including those occurring on the margins of protests, and other criminal cases involving journalists, particularly by ensuring a high level of compliance with human rights in handling incidents involving journalists, through binding guidelines, data collection, and capacity-building measures;
- Improve the working conditions of Albanian journalists, particularly by strengthening the protection of journalists.

Albanian Legislation on Media Ownership

Media pluralism is a broad, essential, and important concept for an effective democracy. The case law of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) is clear in emphasizing that “Article 10 of the Convention refers not only to the individual right to freedom of the media, but also imposes an obligation to guarantee the pluralism of opinions and cultural diversity in the interest of the proper functioning of the democratic system and the freedom of information for all. Moreover, pluralism is a general rule of European media policy.”

Recommendation No. R (99) of 1999 of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe addressed to member states on measures to promote media pluralism provides several useful elements for defining this concept. In particular, the Explanatory Memorandum clarifies that “Media pluralism” refers both to the existence of a variety of autonomous and independent media outlets (structural pluralism) and to the diversity of communication forms and content, such as thoughts and opinions, made accessible to the public. Politically, media pluralism

¹ European Commission, Albania Report 2024, Brussels 30.10.2024, SWD(2024) 690 final, pg 7

ensures that a broad spectrum of political viewpoints is represented, which is essential for safeguarding democracy and preventing the dominance of a single narrative.

Within the European Union, the notion of pluralism, as a fundamental principle, is provided for in the Treaty of Lisbon as one of the core values of the EU. Furthermore, with the adoption of the European Media Freedom Act, approved by the European Parliament on March 13, 2024, it is emphasized that, considering the unique role of media services, the protection of media freedom and media pluralism as two of the main pillars of democracy and the rule of law constitutes an essential element of a well-functioning internal market for media services.²

In fact, going further, the EMFA specifies in Article 22, paragraph 1, the obligation of EU Member States to implement restrictive changes to media freedom to prevent media concentration in the hands of a few individuals.

Article 22 states: “Member States shall establish, in national legislation, substantive and procedural rules that allow for an assessment of concentrations in the media market, which may have a significant impact on media pluralism and editorial independence.”³

There is a well-established connection between the concept of media pluralism and market competition, a relationship that often gives rise to significant debate and misunderstanding. The primary point of misunderstanding lies in the contrast between ex ante and ex post intervention, between regulation and competition. Regulatory interventions, now defined also in the EMFA for both member states and candidate countries, protect competition and regulate the market according to the standards presented in this act. This protection of competition aims to prevent concentration in the audiovisual sector in the hands of a few individuals.

Ownership restrictions in audiovisual media have always been accompanied by intense debates, including in Albania. Law no. 97/2013 “On Audiovisual Media in the Republic of Albania,” approved by the consensus of all political forces regarding its content, at the time of approval, had simple and clear rules in this regard.

Compared to previous legal regulations, this law presents improvements in terms of media ownership by addressing the shortcomings observed in the practical implementation of previous laws. However, Decision no. 56/2016 of the Constitutional Court further complicated, not only from a legal perspective, the situation of media ownership in the Albanian audiovisual media market, reopening the legal debate on this issue once again.

This regulation, at the time of its approval, was provided for in Article 62 of the law.

² European Commission, European Media Freedom Act, Brussels 11.04.2024, Regulation (EU) 2024/1083

³ Article 22, European Commission, European Media Freedom Act, Brussels 11.04.2024, Regulation (EU) 2024/1083

Specifically:

- “1. National licenses for audio and audiovisual transmissions are granted only to joint stock companies registered in the Republic of Albania, which have as their sole activity the audiovisual field.
2. No natural or legal person, domestic or foreign, may own more than 40% of the total capital of the joint stock company that holds a national license.
3. A natural or legal person who holds shares in a company with a national license may not own more than 20% of the total capital in a second company that also holds a national license. For analog audio transmissions, participation of up to 10% is allowed in a third national company.
4. Such a person is not allowed to obtain a local or regional audio transmission license, nor a local or regional audiovisual transmission license.”

National licenses for program services are also subject to the conditions outlined above.

In the context of audiovisual broadcasting, the law distinguishes between two types of licenses: the transmission license which includes authorization for operating the network and serving as a program operator and the license for the audiovisual program service itself.

Point 10 of Article 62 addresses the issue of “fictitious ownership,” a practice encountered under previous legal frameworks. According to this provision, a shareholder is defined as the actual holder of shares as well as individuals related to them up to the second degree. To avoid ambiguity and ensure clarity, the most precise formulation would be: “...and the spouse, cohabitant, and persons related to them by blood or kinship up to the second degree.” However, even in its current form, the law clearly expresses the legislator’s intent: the shareholder includes not only the legal owner of the shares but also their immediate family members within the specified degree of kinship. The ownership restriction thus applies collectively to this entire group.

Point 12 of Article 62 introduces another important restriction: no holder of a national broadcasting license is permitted to broadcast more than 30% of the total advertising volume in the audiovisual broadcasting market.

Additional provisions safeguarding pluralism and fair competition include the legal framework governing the use of multiplexes, as stipulated in Article 63. Together, Articles 62 and 63 provide a clear and straightforward legal structure for addressing ownership restrictions in audiovisual media and issues directly linked to the broader concept of media pluralism.

On April 16, 2015, the Audiovisual Media Authority (AMA) issued a decision to initiate the procedure for granting five private national licenses for digital audiovisual broadcasting, using a “beauty contest” selection method. Under this

procedure, existing historical national analog operators and digital broadcasting operators with prior experience were invited to apply. This preferential treatment excluding an open competition was granted under the transitional provisions of the law during the shift from analog to digital broadcasting, valid until June 17, 2015.

Despite this, AMA's decision contained several legal violations. Specifically, 4 out of the 5 entities invited to apply for a national broadcasting license were in breach of Article 62, particularly the ownership restriction clauses. Had these licenses been granted, it would have constituted a flagrant violation of the law and would have facilitated the creation of a de facto monopoly, in direct opposition to the principle of media pluralism.

The decision to award the licenses was ultimately not finalized by AMA due to the absence of a legal quorum only 4 of the required 5 out of 7 members were present. Consequently, the entities turned to the Tirana First Instance Administrative Court, which, in February 2016, issued a decision granting the licenses. This legally debatable ruling, which AMA did not appeal, focused solely on procedural aspects of the application process. The court did not address the critical issue of ownership restrictions, thereby bypassing a fundamental element of the law.

At the same time, the Albanian Electronic Media Association (AEMA), in April 2016, submitted a request to the Constitutional Court with the object: "Declaration of incompatibility with the Constitution of point 3 of Article 62 of Law no. 97/2013, dated 03.04.2013 'On Audiovisual Media in the Republic of Albania.'"

To continue further, the EMFA specifies: In an assessment of concentrations in the media market, as foreseen in paragraph 1, the following elements shall be taken into account: The expected impact of the concentration in the media market on media pluralism, including its effects on the formation of public opinion and the diversity of media services and media offerings in the market, taking into account the online environment and the interests of the parties involved, connections to or activities in other media or non-media businesses.⁴

In this concept, EU Member States and candidate countries must consider the impact and concentration of the media market not only in terms of the concentration of media in the hands of a single person, but also in relation to the access of other businesses that may be owned by the same owner or shareholders.

Therefore, if we refer to the media concentration restrictions foreseen in Article 62, point 3 of Law no. 97/2013 "On Audiovisual Media in the Republic of Albania", which was later overturned by the Constitutional Court, we must understand that, following the adoption of the EMFA, media will no longer be considered just like any other business, and the states must adopt substantive and procedural rules to

⁴ Article 22 (b), European Commission, European Media Freedom Act, Brussels 11.04.2024, Regulation (EU) 2024/1083

assess market concentrations that may undermine pluralism and independence. Under these conditions, the Republic of Albania must consider new legal changes on media ownership limitations, which could raise issues, as changes to media concentration restrictions might not be effectively implemented due to the lack of retroactive effect of the adopted rules.

Nevertheless, it is up to the legislator to align, in principle, with the European Media Freedom Act. Meanwhile, in the case of identifying harmful impacts, states may:

- block the concentration,
- impose conditions for approval,
- require guarantees for the preservation of pluralism and editorial independence.

Article 21 of the EMFA specifies that: Legislative, regulatory, or administrative measures taken by a Member State, which may affect media pluralism or the editorial independence of media service providers operating in the internal market, must be properly justified and proportionate. These measures must be reasonable, transparent, objective, and non-discriminatory.⁵

In this approach, consequently, the Albanian state must take a step back to Article 62, point 3, of the law, which was repealed. This is because media ownership is currently highly concentrated in the hands of a few individuals in Albania, whereas the requirements based on EMFA stipulate that media service providers must operate within new parameters, presuming the principle of proportionality. Nevertheless, it is not yet known exactly how action will be taken, considering there is a Constitutional Court decision prohibiting media ownership restrictions, while the international standard requires states to undertake justified, non-discriminatory, and objective measures to avoid media capture and censorship of editorial activity. A further issue remains the element of the lack of retroactive legal effect, meaning the new rules to be adopted by member states must have a long-term perspective for change.

Decision No. 56, dated 27.07.2016 of the Constitutional Court of Albania

The Albanian Electronic Media Association requested the repeal of point 3 of Article 62 of Law No. 97/2013, dated 03.04.2013 “On Audiovisual Media in the Republic of Albania”, with the following content: “No natural or legal person,

⁵ Article 22 (b), European Commission, European Media Freedom Act, Brussels 11.04.2024, Regulation (EU) 2024/1083

domestic or foreign, may own more than 40 percent of the total capital of a joint-stock company that holds a national license for audio broadcasting or a national license for audiovisual broadcasting.”

The applicant talked that: “The public interest is protected not through restriction, but through alternative forms, such as mixed ownership or limitations based on real market data, as is currently occurring within the European Community through the *acquis communautaire*.”

The restriction sanctioned in point 3 of Article 62 of the law is not found in any European or regional legislation, except for France; thus, it represents a countertrend to the alignment of legislation with the European framework. Such a restriction is not found in any other field of high public interest, such as: education, healthcare, security, and pharmaceuticals. The application of a restrictive mechanism on ownership automatically places citizens who choose to engage in media activities in a different position compared to citizens who choose to engage in any other lawful economic activity.”

The interested party, AMA, summarized these arguments as follows: “The restrictive criterion set out in point 3 of Article 62 of the media law, regarding the percentage of shareholding, is not in coherence with changes in the media market. The restriction under judicial review was initially necessary to ensure diversity in the audio and audiovisual market, which is now guaranteed through a number of other mechanisms, such as the limitation on the number of licenses a commercial entity can hold, the limitation on the number of programs depending on the type of license it holds whether it is a license for digital transmissions or for providing audio or audiovisual program services as well as the restriction on the percentage of advertising.”

The Constitutional Court evaluated the claim regarding the violation of economic freedom as a result of the lack of public interest and the disproportionate intervention of the legislator, by reaffirming the standards of economic freedom developed in its jurisprudence. The court, based on its own jurisprudence, holds that media activity carried out by natural or legal persons is an economic activity of general interest, safeguarded by Articles 11 and 17 of the Constitution.

As a result, point 3 of Article 62 of the law under review, which limits the percentage of shares that may be held by natural or legal persons in the capital of joint-stock companies holding national licenses for audio or audiovisual broadcasting, constitutes a restriction of economic freedom.

Regarding the claim of violating the principle of proportionality, the claimant argued that the limitation on shareholders’ ownership is excessive, surpasses the legislator’s purpose of ensuring information diversity, and fails to achieve this purpose. It results in unintended consequences, such as the direct violation of the right to ownership of shares, the freedom of enterprise, the distortion of the normal decision-making processes of the respective companies, and the distribution of shares in media companies.

The interested party, Parliament, claimed that state intervention in economic freedom, through the provision under judicial review, is dictated by the situation of press freedom in the country, which has been assessed over the years by authoritative reports as “partly free.” The Parliament acted within its evaluative capacity in choosing a restriction tool deemed necessary and appropriate for the Albanian context. The intervention is proportional, as it does not affect all media, but only those holding a national license for audio or audiovisual broadcasting, which, due to their position and ability to transmit messages through both sound and image, exert a more immediate, stronger, and more powerful influence than the written media.

The interested party, AMA (Audiovisual Media Authority), argued that the law has already provided other mechanisms that guarantee the public interest aimed at by this restriction, namely avoiding monopolization and concentration, and that the limitation is therefore unnecessary.

In the present case, the Court observes that “the interests of AEMA (Albanian Electronic Media Association) are at stake, which defends and represents interests related to economic freedom, the right to information, and freedom of expression, all protected by the legislator.” From the perspective of balancing interests, three parameters of legislative intervention are assessed:

1. Necessity, the legislator must demonstrate a real need to intervene in limiting shareholding participation in companies holding national audiovisual broadcasting licenses, as an interference with economic freedom;
2. Unavoidability, the legislator must prove that the goal cannot be achieved through other means and that it has used the least harmful tool for the subjects whose economic freedom is being restricted;
3. Suitability, the legislator must justify that the intervention tool is effective and has brought about the expected and desired effects in practice.

In light of the above, the Court considers that AMA, as the monitoring and implementing body of the law, has broad competencies related to ensuring information diversity and preventing share concentration and media market dominance, and has the tools and instruments to effectively exercise these legal responsibilities. The argument presented by the representative of the Parliament in the plenary session, regarding the lack of AMA’s oversight capacity and effectiveness, cannot serve as a sufficient reason to limit AEMA’s economic freedom. The Court emphasizes that even if this is the practical situation, the argument of non-enforcement of the law cannot justify restricting the applicant’s economic freedom. On the contrary, the Court deems that strengthening AMA’s monitoring and sanctioning powers, and finding alternative administrative tools and mechanisms, would be a more effective approach to guarantee information

diversity, which is the ultimate objective of the legislator with the restriction established in point 3 of Article 62 of the law.

In light of the entire provision regulating ownership in terrestrial audio and audiovisual broadcasting, the Court concludes that “the entirety of Article 62 of the law, even without the restriction in point 3 (under judicial review), fulfills the constitutional interests of the legislator to avoid monopolization and concentration in the media market.”

The Constitutional Court assessed that:

“By choosing the harshest tool that of restriction by law the legislator demonstrates, as in other cases where this Court has been obliged to annul legal norms due to failure to respect the principle of proportionality, that the selection of the restrictive measure does not result from an analysis based on data, statistics, factual, economic, political, sociological and legal studies, depending on the situation, nor from arguments by the executive/legislator justifying why the specific tool was chosen over another, how many alternatives were considered, and what positive effect the effectively implemented tool has had in practice i.e., the *post factum* test.”

The Court emphasizes that the objective pursued by the provisions under judicial review is a legitimate one, but nevertheless, the legislator has the duty to balance interests, assess them objectively, avoid conflict by selecting the appropriate means to achieve them, and choose the restrictive tool that is necessary for the purpose, within the national context.

However, in the approach following the adoption of the European Media Freedom Act, the assessment of concentrations in the media market (Article 21 of Regulation 2024/1083) is one of the core pillars of the Act and constitutes the main mechanism for preventing the harmful impact of media concentrations on pluralism and editorial independence.

This article obliges EU Member States to adopt specific legal and procedural rules to evaluate any proposed concentration in the media market that is likely to significantly affect media freedom and the diversity of information sources. The evaluation is not merely economic (as typically done in competition law), but requires a detailed analysis of the impact of a merger or acquisition on public opinion formation, content diversity, the influence on online media, as well as the connections of the involved groups with other media or non-media sectors. Furthermore, the article stipulates that this process must take into account the European Commission’s annual Rule of Law Report, especially the parts concerning media freedom and pluralism.

States not only have the right but also the obligation to intervene if a concentration in the media market presents a risk to pluralism. Measures that may be taken range from rejecting the transaction, imposing conditions for approval, or obtaining detailed guarantees from the parties involved to preserve editorial independence

and media diversity. Moreover, when the concentration has cross-border impact or affects the internal market of the EU, the national decision must be accompanied by consultation and assessment by the European Board for Media Services (EMFA Board), which issues an opinion that must be taken seriously into account. This provision gives the EU a real tool to intervene in defense of pluralism, at a time when media concentrations have become a visible threat to democracy in many Member States.

Even from a comparative perspective, the Court found that “the restrictive model chosen by the Albanian legislator is not found in any of the regional European legislations, and therefore constitutes a countertrend to the alignment of national legislation with the European legal framework.”

The Court concludes that:

“Despite the importance of the legislator’s objective and the presence of public interest in a media system fundamentally based on the diversity of information, under the constitutional requirement for proportional legislative intervention, in this particular case the restrictive measure foreseen does not effectively serve the legislator’s goal, and in this regard is an inappropriate and unnecessary tool.”

In conclusion, the Court assessed that: “The tool chosen by the legislator to restrict ownership quotas of companies operating in the media sector does not bear a reasonable and proportionate link to the legitimate aim of the legislator in promoting diversity of information. Therefore, the Court finds that the legislator’s intervention is not in accordance with the principle of proportionality, and for this reason, point 3 of Article 62 of the media law must be annulled.”

It is important to note the dissenting opinion in this decision, which emphasized that:

“The constitutional principle of proportionality, in cases of limitation of human rights, imposes on the legislator the obligation to define the legal aim and the means for achieving it, while the Court reviews the restrictive measure and the degree of its severity. This review is conducted in terms of compatibility with the purpose and legitimate interest that the legislator seeks to achieve, and whether the imposed measure ‘significantly exceeds’ that aim as a mandatory measure. The Court does not assess whether the measure is appropriate or not. That remains within the legislator’s discretion and evaluative space. In this particular case, the legislator’s interest in transparency of the media and plurality of information was sufficiently important to intervene in Article 62 of the media law through point 3 under review. Even the majority accepted that the objective pursued by the provisions under review is a legitimate one [para. 47 of the decision]. By not agreeing with this conclusion, we consider that the claimant did not provide sufficient arguments to support the position that there were less severe means available to achieve the intended goal, which would have led the Court to conclude that this restriction was unnecessary.”

Contrary to the majority's reasoning, the restriction set out in Point 3 of Article 62 cannot be viewed or interpreted independently from the limitations established in Point 4 of the same article. The repeal of Point 3 would have a direct and immediate effect: it would allow for an increase in ownership concentration in media holding a national license for audio or audiovisual broadcasting from the currently permitted 40% + 20% ownership across different companies to a full 100% + 20% shareholding. Such a shift would significantly intensify media ownership concentration. Therefore, even from a structural and legal interpretation standpoint, a comparative reading of Points 3 and 4 of Article 62 should have led the majority to recognize the necessity of maintaining this restriction, rather than arguing for its removal.

Based on the arguments and analysis, we assess that the majority's position, which concluded that the restriction is unnecessary and ineffective, is supported more by evaluations related to the suitability and timeliness of the restriction's application matters which fall within the legislator's margin of discretion than by constitutional arguments. A similar stance has been taken in other comparable cases, where it has been emphasized: "The Constitutional Court is not competent to evaluate whether the legal regulation is the fairest or most suitable for achieving the legislator's stated objective. The Court's task is to assess whether the outer limits of the legislator's evaluative space have been exceeded."

The decision of the Constitutional Court of Albania to repeal point 3 of Article 62 of the law on audiovisual media which imposed a maximum cap of 40% for shareholding in nationally licensed media constitutes a regressive step in guaranteeing media pluralism and directly contradicts the standards established in the European Media Freedom Act (Regulation (EU) 2024/1083).

If we analyze the collision, we will observe a series of legal conflicts with the Constitutional Court's decision. Firstly, Article 21 of the EMFA requires Member States to implement effective rules for the assessment of media market concentrations, in order to guarantee pluralism and editorial independence. The ownership cap in the Albanian law, although debatable in form, was a clear *ex ante* measure to prevent the creation of monopolies. The repeal of this cap was justified by the Court on the grounds of the legislator's lack of detailed analysis, but was not replaced by any alternative mechanism, as required by the EMFA.

Thus, the Court's decision removes a safeguard without introducing another, leaving a serious regulatory gap in the oversight of media concentration one that is current and has also been acknowledged by the European Commission itself.

Secondly, the EMFA does not prohibit legal restrictions on ownership, but requires that any intervention be justified and proportional, supported by data and concrete analysis. The Albanian Constitutional Court emphasized the lack of such a study by the Parliament and considered the intervention inappropriate and unnecessary. However, in an Albanian reality where there is a lack of a powerful

regulatory authority (as the AMA itself acknowledges in its arguments), imposing a general legal cap is often the only practical way to curb concentration. The removal of this cap, in the absence of real supervisory capacities, poses a direct threat to media pluralism.

Thirdly, the decision also contradicts Article 6 and Article 22 of the EMFA, which are related to transparency in media ownership and interinstitutional cooperation in assessing concentrations. By treating the media merely as an economic activity and protecting it under the principle of freedom of enterprise, the Court has overlooked the special nature of the media as a bearer of public interest and as the foundation of pluralist democracy, as defined by the EMFA.

The Constitutional Court's decision represents an open clash with the spirit and structure of the European Media Freedom Act. It weakens the protection against the concentration of media power, threatens media freedom and pluralism in Albania, and hinders the country's progress in the process of alignment with the EU *acquis communautaire*. In the absence of functional mechanisms for assessing and supervising concentrations, as required by the EMFA, this decision risks leaving the Albanian media market in the hands of a few actors with strong economic and political influence.

Meanwhile, the European Commission highlights numerous problems in its 2024 monitoring report, where Albania has made no progress regarding the legal framework and alignment, while media concentration is one of the issues addressed by the Commission in all its monitoring missions. However, even when considering the current period, there is still no initiative for these necessary changes. The monitoring report states:

"No progress has been made in aligning the legislative framework with the EU *acquis* and European standards, including the Media Freedom Act. Furthermore, there has been no progress in addressing the major challenges hindering media independence, particularly the high concentration of the market and the lack of transparency regarding media ownership, funding sources, and economic interests, including public funds."⁶

The negative assessment in the 2024 Report for Albania concerning progress in aligning with the EU *acquis* and the European Media Freedom Act highlights a series of structural issues that are in clear contradiction with the key articles of Regulation (EU) 2024/1083. The lack of transparency regarding media ownership and funding sources, as well as the high concentration of the market, constitutes direct violations of Article 6 and Article 21 of the Act, which respectively require the full publication of ownership structures and the assessment of the impact of concentrations on media pluralism. Albania has yet to establish such a legal and functional mechanism to supervise this concentration, leaving room for dangerous influences on the formation of public opinion.

⁶ Pg. 38, European Commission, Albania 2024 Report, Brussels, 30.10.2024 SWD(2024) 690 final

Furthermore, the lack of clear rules for the distribution of public funds for the media contradicts Article 24 of the Act, which requires transparency and non-discrimination in the distribution of government advertisements. These funds in Albania are often used as a tool of political influence, undermining editorial independence and fostering clientelism. This also contradicts Article 7, which guarantees the protection of editorial offices from undue interference by owners or external actors. In this context, the failure to address these issues not only constitutes a technical non-compliance with EU standards, but also risks undermining the foundations of a free, independent, and pluralistic media landscape in Albania.

Conclusions

- Re-establishment of ownership limits in national media, not necessarily in the fixed form of 40%, but through a flexible formula sensitive to market dynamics and linked to the actual impact on media pluralism.
- Approval of a specific law for controlling media concentration, in accordance with Article 21 of EMFA, which should include: evaluation procedures, objective indicators for impact on pluralism, and the obligation for public reporting of decisions.
- Creation of a special unit within AMA for monitoring and analyzing the structure of the media market, with statistical, technical, and legal capacities to conduct independent assessments.
- Inclusion of a mandatory consultation mechanism with the European Media Services Board (EMFA Board) for cases of concentration with cross-border or significant national impact.
- Mandatory transparency for media ownership, through the creation of a public register of ownership and related interests (media, advertising, politics, other businesses).
- Obligation for the declaration of media financial sources, particularly related to public funding, government advertisements, large donations, and contracts with state or private institutions with significant influence.
- Revision of public financial support schemes for the media, to avoid favoring dominant actors and to support local, investigative, and independent media.
- Development of a clear methodology for assessing the impact of concentrations on pluralism, including factors such as: combined audience, editorial impact, control of the supply chain (production, distribution, advertising), etc.
- Implementation of alternative corrective measures, such as the separation of management and editorial structures from economic ownership (the “editorial firewall” model) in cases where concentration cannot be avoided.

- Promotion of other forms of media ownership, such as models of media owned by journalists, associations, cooperatives, or public foundations, to diversify the market structure.
- Revision of the law for AMA, to ensure its real institutional and financial independence, through independent procedures for appointing leaders, guaranteed funding, and protection from political pressures.
- Approval of a national strategy for media pluralism, with concrete objectives, measurable indicators, and an implementation calendar, as part of the commitments in the EU integration process.
- Public awareness of the importance of media diversity, through educational campaigns and inclusion of the topic in journalism and civic education programs.

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Media freedom and source protection in international and European standards

Juelda LAMÇE

EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY OF TIRANA

e-mail: juelda.lamce@uet.edu.al

Fabian ZHILLA

CANADIAN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

e-mail: fabian.zhilla@cit.edu.al

Abstract

The role of the media in the society, as a powerful means that contributes to democracy, is strictly related to its responsibility. It implies that the information should be gathered and disseminated in compliance with the law, but also according to ethical professional standards. This is crucial not just for the public trust in the institutions, but also as a testbed to data protection and privacy rights. On the other side, the protection of journalistic sources as a cornerstone of press freedom, enables whistleblowing, investigative journalism, and democratic accountability. However, in the face of threats to national security, terrorism, or serious crime, states increasingly invoke public interest to justify limiting this protection. The tension lies competing public goods: press freedom and rule of law versus public safety. The doctrine considers the protection of journalistic sources as a qualified right, not an absolute one, which is subject to strict scrutiny when limitations are considered. Given the premises, the aim of this paper is to provide a general picture of the international standards invoked

to strike the balance between guarantying media freedom and source protection, in the age of digital media and rapid information flows. The methodology used in this paper is doctrinal legal research method, analyzing critically and in a comparative perspective, relevant theories, legal framework and jurisprudence.

Keywords: media freedom, restrictions, responsible journalism, proportionality, public interest.

Introduction

Media freedom plays a key role in strengthening democratic institutions, protecting human rights, and assuring the proper functioning of the rule of law (Council of Europe, 2016). While upholding their obligations to report truthfully, fairly, and in the public interest, they allow journalists to fulfil their watchdog function, which includes looking into wrongdoing, holding those in authority accountable, and fostering civic engagement (European Court of Human Rights – ECtHR, *Bladet Tromsø and Stensaas v Norway*, 1999).

The limits of journalism have grown in the era of digital media and quick information flows, increasing its threats and impact. Global discussions on journalistic ethics, the boundaries of press freedom, and the function of regulating bodies have been reignited by the spread of false information, sensationalism, and politically driven reporting (European Commission, 2022). As Brown (2016) warns, “the new threat is not state orders for disclosure, but silent technological incursions that render formal protections obsolete” (p. 30). A growing number of sources could be proxies or state actors attempting to influence democratic processes through leaks. Keane (2017) affirms, “the normative foundation of source protection rests on the journalist’s due diligence. Disseminating unverified or strategically misleading leaks weakens the claim to legal immunity” (p. 137). Thus, journalists have a responsibility to contextualise and validate information,

In this light, responsible journalism represents more than just a normative ideal; it becomes a practical imperative for preserving democratic ideals and public trust (Christians et al., 2009). Codes of ethics and legislative provisions govern responsible journalism. In dealing with sources, codes of conduct place a strong emphasis on truthfulness, equity, and accountability. Even though they are not necessarily penalised by law, ethical transgressions damage journalists’ legitimacy and reputation. Leveson (2012) sustains that “accountability begins with self-regulation (...) but the state has a duty to intervene when journalism causes serious public harm” (p. 662).

In order to hold journalists accountable, states refer to: a) defamation and privacy law (which strikes a balance between Articles 10 and 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights - ECHR); confidentiality violations, particularly in corporate or national security circumstances; c) crime-related cooperation (e.g., allowing the release of illegally obtained or classified material). Investigative journalism, whistleblowing, and democratic accountability are all made possible by the protection of journalistic sources, which is a fundamental component of press freedom. However, states are increasingly using the public interest as a justification for restricting this protection when faced with risks to national security, terrorism, or major criminality. The challenge is to maintain democratic scrutiny without sacrificing public safety or the interests of law enforcement. According to the comparative study of the international legal system and pertinent jurisprudence, the following guidelines may be used to balance the interests involved:

- Necessity- disclosure must be necessary to prevent a serious crime or threat. “The protection of journalistic sources is one of the basic conditions for press freedom (...). Without such protection, sources may be deterred from assisting the press in informing the public” (Council of Europe, 2000: 2).
- Proportionality - it emerges from ECtHR’s jurisprudence (especially Article 10 of the ECHR). Stone Sweet and Mathews (2008) argue that proportionality has become a “general principle of law” and is particularly useful in cases where competing rights and interests—such as freedom of expression and national security—must be reconciled.
- Judicial oversight - a competent, independent authority (preferably a judge) must review requests for disclosure. The academic consensus stresses the need for independent judicial oversight and procedural safeguards. According to Venturini: “Any attempt to compel source disclosure must be reviewed by an independent body capable of assessing competing interests—this is not merely procedural but a substantive guarantee” (p. 229).
- Least intrusive means - if the information can be obtained otherwise, source disclosure is impermissible. Freedom of expression is not absolute, but any limitation must pass the three-part test: a) prescribed by law; b) pursue a legitimate aim (e.g., national security, prevention of crime); c) necessary in a democratic society (strict proportionality test). “The necessity requirement imposes a high threshold (...). Authorities must demonstrate that the disclosure is the least restrictive means of achieving the legitimate aim” (Rowbottom, 2010: 381).

Doctrinal debate

Freedom of expression and its limitations

The conflict between liberal principles of free speech and practical concerns about equality, harm, and order characterises the doctrinal dispute on freedom of expression. The paramount liberal justification for free speech is articulated in Mill's reflections "On Liberty" (1859).

He emphasises that individual liberty and democratic engagement depend on free discourse, which can only be tolerated under certain conditions, mainly when speech directly injures other people (*Harm Principle*). The *liberal theory of the press*, which is based on the principles of pluralism, public accountability, and free expression, contends that media freedom is a prerequisite for democracy and is important to many democracies (Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm, 1956). According to this view, the press facilitates the free flow of information required for informed public engagement by acting as a "watchdog" over the government and other centres of power. "Journalists act as public watchdogs, and this function is critically dependent on the ability to maintain source confidentiality" (Barendt, 2005: 422). From this perspective, restrictions on media freedom are viewed as threats to democratic deliberation and civil liberties.

The *social responsibility* doctrine contends that ethical duties to the public must be balanced with media freedom, having been formed in response to alleged abuses under the liberal model. As Christians et al. (2009) highlight, responsible journalism is not only a normative ideal but also a practical requirement for upholding democratic ideals and preserving public confidence. Thus, the press should be accountable in addition to being free, guaranteeing truthfulness, equity, and the general welfare. According to this perspective, press freedom is not unrestricted and entails obligations to protect the truth and refrain from harmful content, including hate speech, disinformation, and provocation. Codes of ethics, self-regulation, and media regulation are therefore valid ways to guarantee ethical journalism without unnecessarily compromising editorial independence.

A contextual approach is encouraged by *balanced constitutionalism*, which holds that restrictions must be properly interpreted and supported by the law, but that press freedom and source protection are not unqualified (Barendt, 2005). Mendel (2013) states that: "A doctrinal approach must reconcile the right of journalists with the procedural rights of defendants, particularly in criminal trials where exculpatory evidence may depend on source disclosure" (p. 45). While some legal academics emphasise the state's responsibility to protect vulnerable communities from incitement to hatred and violence, others contend that even

laws prohibiting hate speech run the risk of stifling opposing viewpoints (Waldron, 2012; Weinstein, 2009).

According to the *security realism* theory, security concerns may take precedence over civil freedoms, including press freedom, under extreme situations like terrorism or state collapse (Posner, 2006). However, Gillian (2006) points out that governments are increasingly using ambiguous or overbroad language related to national security to impose restrictions on press freedom. This raises questions about how the press's democratic watchdog role is being undermined.

Scholars often warn of the *chilling effect* of legislative incursions into journalistic freedom, forceful subpoenas, and state surveillance. Benkler (2011) presents the idea of a *networked public sphere* and makes the case that even slight legal restrictions have the power to stifle critical voices and limit the scope of investigative journalism. According to this perspective, "the mere potential of state monitoring or retaliation changes journalistic behaviour, often discouraging coverage of contentious topics" (p. 327).

Media responsibility and source protection

Media responsibility and source secrecy may mutually be reinforcing rather than antagonistic. According to if journalists behave in the public interest, in good faith, and with ethical consideration Plaisance (2014). While cautioning against protecting self-serving or manipulative individuals, the author supports "ethically justified secrecy" when it safeguards susceptible sources. According to Kovach and Rosenstiel (2014), journalists can still be held accountable without revealing their sources as long as they: a) explain why the source is reliable; b) justify the need for anonymity; and c) are open and honest about what is unknown or unproven. The focus of this paradigm is on "methodological accountability" rather than complete source disclosure. Source protection facilitates the dissemination of accurate information that is essential to deliberative democracy, according to the liberal philosophy of the press (Habermas, 2006). Weaver and Willnat (2012) emphasise that when institutional checks are ineffective, secrecy enables sources to come forward with material that could uncover issues of great public concern or expose misconduct.

Conversely, "the lack of source protection deters insiders from coming forward, which diminishes the media's ability to expose misconduct". (Schulhofer, 2010). Some academics support almost complete protection, particularly where it serves the public interest. "When the information revealed is of public interest, protection of sources must be near absolute. The burden of proof must lie squarely with the state to justify interference" (Leveson, 2012: 672). Critics caution, however, that unqualified source protection could hide dishonest reporting, particularly in the era of disinformation, harmful leaks, and clandestine state manipulation. Not all journalists serve the public

interest, and automatic privileges may be abused Schauer (2005). “There must be safeguards to ensure that source protection is not invoked to conceal illegality or abuse journalistic immunity” (Schauer, 2005: 55). Same considerations are held by Fenwick & Phillipson (2006), who argue that: “A journalist who becomes a conduit for falsehood or state propaganda cannot invoke source protection without question. Accountability must temper immunity” (p. 220).

International and European legal framework on media freedom and its limitations

As the foundation of democratic societies, freedom of expression offers a strong set of guidelines to safeguard media freedom and encourage ethical reporting. These standards outline duties for moral behaviour, professional integrity, and social responsibility in addition to upholding the legal rights to freedom of expression and the press.

The freedom to “seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers” is protected by Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (United Nations, 1948). Freedom of expression, which encompasses freedom of the press, is established as a basic right by this clause. Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) goes into further detail about it. It requires states to uphold media freedom, but it also allows for restrictions, like those required to safeguard public order, national security, or other people’s rights, only when necessary and proportionate (United Nations, 1966).

The most reliable legal foundation for media freedom is found in Article 10 of the (ECHR). According to the Council of Europe (1950), it safeguards the “freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority.” When it comes to political speech and issues of public concern, the ECtHR has repeatedly upheld that media freedom is “one of the cornerstones of a democratic society” (*Handyside v. the United Kingdom*, 1976).

However, Article 10(2) permits limitations that are “necessary in a democratic society” and “prescribed by law” for purposes like maintaining national security or safeguarding the reputation of others. As a result, there is now a legal balance between freedom and res, and states are responsible for making sure that any restrictions on media freedom are reasonable and appropriate. By acknowledging that the preservation of journalistic sources is crucial to the media’s watchdog role, the Court also encourages ethical journalism (*Goodwin v. United Kingdom*, 1996).

The Council of Europe in its Recommendation CM/Rec (2011)7 on media freedom and responsible journalism highlights that: “Media have

responsibilities and duties when exercising their freedom of expression. Among these responsibilities is a minimum requirement to check the accuracy of their information and to provide an opportunity for a person criticized to respond". The Declaration of the Committee of Ministers (2007) on the responsibility of journalists that: "Responsible journalism means journalists should be accurate, fair, impartial, and respect human dignity and reputation, while serving the public's right to know".

Freedom of expression and freedom of the media are guaranteed under Article 11 of the European Union Charter of Fundamental Rights (European Union, 2012). Initiatives like the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA) and the European Democracy Action Plan (EDAP), which seek to improve ownership transparency, combat disinformation, and boost media independence, further solidify the EU's commitment (European Commission, 2022).

While avoiding inciting hatred or violence, Member States are also required by the EU Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD) to maintain editorial independence and journalistic standards in broadcasting (European Parliament & Council, 2018). Furthermore, independent organisations like the European Regulators Group for Audiovisual Media Services (ERGA) advocate best practices in responsible journalism around the continent and assist in keeping an eye on adherence to EU regulations.

Mill's reasoning is mainly reflected in modern human rights legislation. Restrictions that are "prescribed by law," promote a "legitimate aim" (such as national security, public order, health, or morals), and are "necessary in a democratic society" are permitted under ECHR Article 10(2). Similar grounds for restriction are established under ICCPR Article 19(3), which also requires need and proportionality. Therefore, restrictions are permitted—but only under close examination—even if the right to free speech is a fundamental one. Source protection is acknowledged as crucial both the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media and the UN Human Rights Committee (General Comment No. 34, 2011), while both parties recognise possible limitations under strict necessity and proportionality (OSCE, 2012).

Case law on restrictions to media freedom in a comparative perspective

ECtHR's jurisprudence

In accordance with Article 10 of the ECHR, which protects freedom of expression, the ECtHR has produced a complex and dynamic body of case law. The study that follows examines how the Court has interpreted acceptable limitations on

media freedom, namely when it comes to matters of national security, illegal information collection, and journalistic source protection. According to Article 10, there are some exceptions to the rule of free speech. These must be interpreted strictly, though, and the necessity of any limitations must be demonstrated (*Stoll v. Switzerland* ([GC], paragraph 101, as reaffirmed in *Morice v. France* ([GC], paragraph 124), and *Pentikäinen v. Finland* ([GC], paragraph 87)).

The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) highlights that national courts have broad discretion when deciding whether to restrict media freedom, particularly when it comes to national security issues (*Hadjianastassiou v. Greece*, paragraph 47). However, these courts must make a comprehensive and equitable evaluation, weighing public and private interests rationally rather than depending just on the formal designation as “secret” (*Görmüş and Others v. Turkey*, paragraphs 64–66; *Gîrleanu v. Romania*, paragraph 95). The responsible authorities may not be required to provide as much depth in their reasoning in national security issues as they would in, say, routine civil or administrative cases (*Šeks v. Croatia*, paragraph 71).

In *Brambilla and Others v. Italy* the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) made clear the concept of responsible journalism, affirming that: “if a journalist’s actions breach the duty to comply with criminal law, they must be aware of the legal responsibilities, including the possibility of punishment for violating the law,” (paragraph 64). In this instance, the applicants—including journalists—participated in the unlawful interception of phone calls, including those from the police that were not meant for them. This means that if a journalist obtains information unlawfully, e.g., by conducting unauthorized wiretaps, this activity is illegal and may be punished in accordance with national laws and international human rights standards. Media freedom cannot be used to protect actions that constitute violations of criminal law, and such punishment is not inappropriate or arbitrary but necessary to uphold the rule of law and trust in public institutions. In this context, the ECtHR has made it clear that there is a boundary which journalist cannot cross as otherwise, they risk legal sanctions, including fines, imprisonment, or other penalties.

Similar considerations were held in *Dammann v. Switzerland* (paragraph 55), affirming that using unfair tactics, including threats or deception, to get information is against the law and ethics and may be grounds for punishment. As a result, a journalist must adhere to the legal and professional ethics frameworks while also respecting the legal restrictions on the methods of obtaining information. provided individuals go beyond these bounds, their behaviour might be subject to legal repercussions; nevertheless, provided the penalty is reasonable and equitable, it will not violate their Article 10 right to free speech.

The European Court of Human Rights has stressed that when evaluating potential limitations, journalists should consider how they acquired information

that is categorised as “secret” (*Stoll v. Switzerland* [GC], paragraphs 140-141). The result can be different in situations when the journalist received the information unlawfully (for example, by unauthorised means). However, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) has determined that the journalist’s professional obligations are not always satisfied by the lack of criminal activity in getting the material (*Stoll v. Switzerland* [GC], paragraph 144; *Fressoz and Roire v. France* [GC], paragraph 52). Therefore, it is necessary to assess whether a journalist complied with journalistic ethics and obligations, even if they did not break any laws.

Therefore, the Court highlights two main aspects to be assessed in assessing journalists’ *responsibility*: 1) the method of obtaining the information and 2) the way it is presented in publication (*Stoll v. Switzerland* [GC], paragraph 140). A journalist must engage in responsible journalism, balancing the public’s right to be informed with the potential harm that might arise from publishing secret information. Moreover, the Court emphasizes that *public interest* is a key factor in assessing restrictions: if the published material is important for informing the public about issues of general interest, this may provide protection for the journalist (*Norman v. UK*, paragraphs 88–90). In this case, a prison employee was punished for misconduct after disclosing information about the prison in exchange for payment, and the ECtHR considered the punishment lawful, citing the lack of public interest and the financial motivation of the offender.

The ECtHR promotes responsible journalism by recognizing the protection of journalistic sources as essential to media’s watchdog function (*Goodwin v. United Kingdom*, 1996). “Without such protection, sources may be deterred from assisting the press in informing the public” (paragraph 39). In this case the Court held that compelling a journalist to reveal a source was disproportionate since the commercial interests at stake were not serious enough to override the chilling effect on press freedom (para. 45). However, in *Nordisk Film & TV A/S v. Denmark* (2021), the Court allowed disclosure in the context of an ongoing terrorism investigation, showing that exceptions are permitted under strict scrutiny. In this case, limited interference with source protection was allowed, due to the gravity of the crime (terrorism) and the fact that the identity of the source was already known to police. Thus, the ECtHR ruled that the interference passed the proportionality test.

US jurisprudence

From a comparative perspective of legal system, Georgiou (2017) explores how different legal cultures treat journalistic privilege and source protection. While civil law countries tend to codify protections narrowly, common law systems rely more on judicial interpretation and a balancing of interests. “Comparative

jurisprudence reflects a spectrum of protections, with the strongest frameworks being those that combine constitutional guarantees, statutory protections, and robust judicial oversight” (Georgiou, 2017: 245).

In *Branzburg v. Hayes* (1972), the U.S. Supreme Court decided that reporters do not have an absolute First Amendment privilege when a journalist named Paul Branzburg declined to testify before a grand jury regarding his sources in drug-related stories. According to the argument, journalists who are forced to testify before grand juries—even if doing so means disclosing private sources—are not protected by the First Amendment. However, Justice Powell’s concurring opinion recommended that judges weigh press freedom against the need for evidence on an individual basis, allowing for a qualified privilege. Numerous federal circuit courts have acknowledged the qualified reporter’s privilege in both civil and criminal matters, notwithstanding *Branzburg*. Whether the information is a) relevant and material, b) not available through other sources, and c) there is a compelling interest in disclosure are frequently the three main tests. For instance, the court acknowledged qualified privilege in civil matters in the case *United States v. Burke* (1983), and it confirmed that the right also applies to non-confidential information in the case of *Shoen v. Shoen* (1993).

In addition, the First Amendment does not protect journalists from being held liable when they break a confidentiality promise to a source. In the case *Cohen v. Cowles Media Co.* (1991), a source gave information to reporters in exchange for confidentiality. The papers published his name anyway. The Court upheld a breach of contract claim. In the case *Zerilli v. Smith* (1981), the court stressed that civil litigants must demonstrate they have exhausted all other sources before compelling reporters to reveal sources.

Case law protecting journalists, known as shield law vary widely between states: some offer absolute privilege in civil cases (e.g., California, New York), others offer only qualified privilege or no protection in criminal matters. For example, in the case *In re Judith Miller* (2005), the reporter for *The New York Times*, refused to testify before the jury on her confidential source who revealed the identity of a CIA operative. Her source was found guilty of perjury and obstruction, and the court denied her claim of reporter’s privilege. She was also imprisoned for contempt of court.

In a latest case, *Chen v. FBI et al.* (2024), Dr. Chen, a naturalized U.S. citizen and founder of the University of Management and Technology (UMT) came under FBI investigation over alleged misrepresentations on her immigration forms concerning past work in China. The FBI executed search warrants on her home and UMT’s offices, seizing personal and institutional documents. Though prosecutors ultimately declined to file charges, Fox News aired a series of reports, written by the journalist Herridge, suggesting Chen concealed

ties to the Chinese military and may have used UMT to facilitate intelligence collection. The reports included sensitive documents and photos believed to have originated from the FBI's investigation. Believing the leak violated the federal Privacy Act, Chen spent years trying to find the source of the leak and filed lawsuits against four government institutions, using discovery tools, subpoenas, depositions, and interviews, yet was unable to confirm who released the materials.

Chen subpoenaed Fox News and the journalist Herridge for depositions and documents, arguing she had exhausted all other avenues. The media moved to quash the subpoenas, invoking the reporter's qualified First Amendment privilege. The District Court partially denied Herridge's motion, holding that under binding precedents (*Zerilli v. Smith*, 1981; *Lee v. DOJ*, 2005), the privilege could be overcome if the information sought is central to the plaintiff's case and if the plaintiff has exhausted all alternative sources. The Court found both criteria met: the identity of the leaker was critical to proving the Privacy Act violation, and Chen had undertaken exhaustive steps over five years to identify the leaker, leaving Herridge as the only viable source. Therefore, the Court ruled that Herridge must comply with the subpoena.

In this decision, the Court carefully balances the foundational role of a free press with binding precedent that limits an absolute reporter's privilege. It acknowledges the importance of investigative journalism and confidential sources, invoking *N.Y. Times Co. v. United States* (1971), to reaffirm the press's duty to inform the public. Nonetheless, the Court stresses that it cannot "place a thumb on the scale in favor of confidentiality" at the expense of the legal standards set in *Zerilli v. Smith* (1981), and *Lee v. Dep't of Justice* (2005). These decisions show that when a litigant can show the importance of the information and the depletion of alternate sources, the reporter's privilege is not absolute and should cede.

Moreover, the Court rejects the notion that compelling disclosure will have a chilling effect on journalism. It observes that "almost two decades have passed since *Lee* reaffirmed *Zerilli*," yet confidential-source journalism continues robustly. Empirical studies cited, such as RonNell Andersen Jones's 2008 work, suggest that while subpoena requests may have risen slightly, they have not led to an "avalanche" of disclosures. In fact, most courts applying the *Zerilli-Lee* standard still rarely compel source identification, and "cases requiring reporters to divulge confidential sources have remained few and far between." Even anecdotal concerns of a chilling effect appear overstated, with one study showing most newsroom leaders found sources still willing to speak confidentially (Jones, 2008: 648–49). Ultimately, the Court emphasizes that while DOJ policy changes may strengthen protections internally, judicial rulings must adhere to binding precedent and not on policy preferences or hypothetical fears.

UK jurisprudence

The question of whether journalists could be forced to disclose a source who leaked a secret company document was resolved by the House of Lords (now the Supreme Court) in the case *Financial Times Ltd & Others v. Interbrew SA* (2002). In this case, several media outlets, including the *Financial Times*, published leaked documents related to a company (*Interbrew*), which sought a disclosure order to identify the source. Journalists invoked source protection under Article 10 of the ECHR. In its judgment, the House of Lords held that source protection is not absolute, but disclosure orders must meet a strict necessity test. It argued that Courts must balance Article 10 rights with competing interests (e.g. preventing serious harm). However, in this case, the order was upheld: *Interbrew's* commercial interests and the leak's potential for harm justified the request. The standards provided in this case is that the protection of journalistic sources is a fundamental condition of press freedom, but it can be overridden if: a) the information is crucial to the claim; b) there are no alternative means to obtain it; c) disclosure serves a pressing social need.

In the case *Times Newspapers Ltd v. Flood* (2017), the Supreme Court issued on the question defamation versus public interest in reporting police corruption. In this case, a police officer (Flood) was accused in *The Times* of corruption. He later sued for defamation, and *The Times* relied on the public interest defense. The Court decided in favor of *The Times*, emphasizing the role of responsible journalism under the Reynolds defense (now codified in Defamation Act 2013 as the “public interest” defense). The case involved source protection indirectly, by upholding journalists’ right to report sensitive allegations without naming sources, if they act responsibly.

In the case *ABC & Others v. Telegraph Media Group Ltd* (2018), the second instance court imposed a temporary injunction on the *Daily Telegraph* preventing publication of #MeToo allegations, citing confidentiality agreements. Though not a Supreme Court case, it raised serious concerns about source protection and press freedom. The claimants withdrew, and the Supreme Court refused to consider another appeal, but the case led to public and legal criticism of gag orders restricting journalism.

The limitations on the freedom of expression were also highlighted in *Ashworth Hospital Authority v. MGN Ltd* case (2002). In its decision, the House of Lords ruled on protection of journalist sources considering public interest in preventing crime and preserving healthcare confidentiality. *The Daily Mirror*, owned by MGN Ltd, published a story about Ian Brady, the convicted Moors murderer, who was detained at Ashworth High-Security Hospital. The story was based on confidential medical and internal information leaked by an employee of the hospital. Ashworth

Hospital sought a disclosure order to detect the source but MGN refused to disclose it, claiming journalistic privilege and the relevance of public interest journalism. The House of Lords ruled in favor of Ashworth Hospital, reaffirming that freedom of expression is not an absolute right. It argued that: a) the leak of confidential medical and security information posed serious risks to hospital integrity, patient safety, and staff security; b) although source protection is fundamental, this was a justifiable interference; c) the disclosure was necessary for the prevention of crime, especially given the breach of trust and misconduct by a hospital insider.

Concluding remarks

In conclusion, while freedom of expression and media freedom are firmly entrenched as foundational rights within international and regional human rights frameworks, they are not unfettered. International law establishes a dual framework: one that robustly protects the media's role as a public watchdog, and another that imposes corresponding responsibilities to ensure that journalistic activity adheres to the rule of law, professional ethics, and the public interest. Contemporary legal standards demand that any interference with press freedom be justified by legitimate aims and implemented through measures that are strictly necessary and proportionate, reflecting a careful equilibrium between media freedom and press accountability.

Across European, American, and UK jurisprudence, courts have consistently affirmed that while journalists serve a vital democratic function by informing the public and scrutinizing power, the exercise of press freedom is conditioned by legal and ethical boundaries. The ECtHR, through cases such as *Brambilla v. Italy* and *Dammann v. Switzerland*, has underscored that journalists may be held accountable when their conduct involves criminal breaches or unethical information gathering techniques. The Court applies a contextual and proportionality-based analysis, particularly when publication involves classified or sensitive material, requiring scrutiny of both the means of obtaining information and the manner of its dissemination, as articulated in *Stoll v. Switzerland*.

In the United States, although the First Amendment offers expansive protections, the U.S. Supreme Court in *Branzburg v. Hayes* declined to recognize an absolute reporter's privilege, instead allowing for compelled disclosure in judicial proceedings. Subsequent case law, notably *Zerilli v. Smith* and the recent *Chen v. FBI* (2024) decision, has developed a qualified privilege framework based on the centrality of the information to a legal claim and the exhaustion of alternative sources. In *Chen*, the court concluded that these criteria were met, thereby compelling the journalist to testify, illustrating that press freedom does not override substantial legal interests when due process and accountability are at stake.

Similarly, UK jurisprudence reinforces a measured approach to source protection. In *Financial Times v. Interbrew* and *Ashworth Hospital v. MGN*, courts acknowledged that journalistic privilege, while fundamental, may be overridden where disclosure is strictly necessary to protect public safety, prevent harm, or serve the interests of justice. The courts have also embraced the concept of “responsible journalism” as a normative benchmark, particularly where reporting implicates issues such as defamation, commercial harm, or confidentiality breaches.

Thus, the comparative case law reveals a converging legal approach where media freedom, though essential to democratic governance, is not absolute. Journalists are expected to operate within a framework of legality, ethics, and responsibility. The courts have made clear that the protection of journalistic sources and editorial independence must be balanced against other fundamental constitutional rights. Ultimately, responsible journalism entails not only accurate and fair reporting but also lawful and ethical methods of information gathering, with due regard for the rights and reputations of others.

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Technology-Driven Data Journalism: Transparency and Accuracy Mechanisms for Innovation and Regulation of the Media in Albania Aligned with EU Standards

Anxhela FERHATAJ

ORCID: [HTTPS://ORCID.ORG/0000-0002-1054-2351](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1054-2351)

DEPARTMENT OF INFORMATICS & TECHNOLOGY,

FACULTY OF ENGINEERING, INFORMATICS AND ARCHITECTURE,

EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY OF TIRANA, TIRANA, ALBANIA

Abstract

Purpose: *This study analyzes three web applications for interrogating information flows and narratives. It examines an explanatory web app derived from the book “From Isolation to Integration: Media Discourse on Albania’s EU Accession: Monitoring National TV Narratives and Public Perceptions”, Tools for Innovation Monitoring Analytics as a policy-trend and weak-signals dashboard, and OSoMeNet as a diffusion-mapping tool.*

Design/methodology/approach: *Comparative, multi-layer design across three applications: an explanatory web app derived from the book “From Isolation to Integration: Media Discourse on Albania’s EU Accession: Monitoring National TV Narratives and Public Perceptions”, TimAnalytics for research and policy signals (2015–2025), and OSoMeNet for recent online diffusion. TimAnalytics outputs are deduplicated and aggregated by year and document type. OSoMeNet interaction networks (replies, mentions, reposts) yield giant-component share, modularity,*

betweenness of bridging hubs, cascade size and depth, and time. Retrieval dates, queries, and export hashes are archived for reproducibility.

Findings: *TimAnalytics* shows sustained growth in fake-news detection after 2018 and a second wave in 2022–2024, a 2025 tilt toward large-language-model and multimodal approaches, and a geography concentrated outside the Western Balkans. OSoMeNet reveals a sparse, modular network for the most recent three months (1,464 nodes; 1,511 edges; average degree 2.06; density 0.14%), with mentions outweighing replies and bridging hubs driving cross-community reach. The book-derived app documents outlet differences in agenda, frames, and tone and flags claim-dense TV segments that often precede online spread. Together, the tools increase transparency through source-linked visuals and audit trails, improve detection accuracy when paired with local evaluation sets and error analysis by outlet and claim type, and enable timelier corrections by monitoring core communities and routing through hubs.

Originality: An integrated assessment of three applications (TV framing, research-policy signals, online diffusion) produced convergent, reproducible metrics supporting transparent pipelines, accurate detection, and timely corrections in newsroom practice.

Keywords: data journalism, web applications, misinformation detection, network diffusion analysis, transparency, correction timeliness

Introduction

Digital data now shapes how people learn about the world. Data journalism has matured in this environment by combining reporting with computation so that evidence can be gathered, analyzed, and shown to readers in ways that are transparent and easy to check (Bounegru & Gray, 2021; Lewis & Westlund, 2014; Kalender, 2024). The information environment is also more adversarial. Large-scale studies show that false stories can travel farther and faster than true ones on social media, a pattern driven mostly by human sharing behavior rather than bots (Vosoughi, Soroush, Roy, & Aral, 2018). European policy has moved in parallel. Both the Digital Services Act (European Parliament and Council, 2022) and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (European Commission, 2018) continue to impact the workings of data-intensive newsrooms within the framework of assigning accountability and the protection of personal data. This study analyzes three web applications for interrogating information flows and narratives. It examines an explanatory web app derived from the book “From Isolation to Integration: Media Discourse on Albania’s EU Accession: Monitoring National TV Narratives and Public Perceptions” (Budini, Idrizi, & Marko, 2025),

Tools for Innovation Monitoring (TIM) Analytics as a policy-trend and weak-signals dashboard (European Commission, Joint Research Centre, 2025), and OSoMeNet as a diffusion-mapping tool (Indiana University Bloomington, 2025). Together, these tools offer complementary approaches to building transparent timelines, tracking salient issues, and mapping cross-platform networks. Addressing this gap, the study asks to what extent technology-based media analysis applications, in Albania and comparable international contexts, improve transparency, detection accuracy, and the timeliness of corrections in data journalism.

Literature Review

Digital data now structures how journalism is produced and consumed (Kalender, 2024). Newsrooms work inside flows of text, audio, video, and social signals that move faster than manual routines can manage. Data journalism emerged in response to this reality. It pairs reporting with computation so that evidence can be gathered, analyzed, and presented in forms readers can verify. Foundational scholarship treats the shift as both craft and critique and calls for methods that are reproducible, open, and legible to non-specialists (Bounegru & Gray, 2021; Lewis & Westlund, 2014). In practical terms, this includes audit trails, shared code or notebooks, transparent source notes, and visualizations that make the reasoning traceable.

The information environment has also become more adversarial. A large study of Twitter found that false stories travel farther and faster than true ones, even after accounting for bot traffic, which suggests that human sharing and novelty seeking drive much of the spread (Vosoughi, Soroush, Roy, & Aral, 2018). Reviews argue for interdisciplinary responses that combine social science, computer science, and journalism so that methods connect technical detection with public understanding and newsroom ethics (Lazer, et al., 2018). Regulation shapes these choices in Europe. The GDPR sets the ground rules for handling personal data and spells out people's rights (European Commission, 2018). The Digital Services Act adds duties for very large platforms to assess risks, increase transparency, and provide access to data about systemic risks, which helps public-interest reporting (European Parliament and Council, 2022). For projects that analyze media narratives, this translates into privacy-first pipelines, minimal data retention, and clear documentation of the lawful basis for every step.

Scalable text-analysis methods now help researchers and journalists read large corpora without losing nuance. Good practice still calls for clear constructs, careful model validation, and strong domain knowledge. Automation cannot replace close reading or problem-specific checks (Grimmer & Stewart, 2013). Topic modeling

helps map recurring themes, while sentiment analysis summarizes tone across outlets and over time (Pang & Lee, 2008). Modern pipelines add named-entity recognition, frame classification, and timeline construction. When combined with transparent visualization, these techniques support explanatory storytelling on complex policy beats, where readers need to see not only what is being said but also how emphasis shifts as events unfold.

Several challenges remain. Many newsrooms lack training in statistics and coding (de-Lima-Santos & Salaverría, 2021). Data gaps and unverified sources mislead unless teams invest in verification, cleaning, and triangulation (Postma, 2024). Training and collaboration help close these gaps (Yang, 2021). Mixed teams of journalists, data scientists, and subject experts produce more credible work by combining strengths in framing problems and evaluating models. Clear documentation reduces handoff errors, and firm editorial standards keep claims proportionate and easy to understand. Artificial intelligence (AI), big data analytics, and natural language processing (NLP) extend journalists' capacity, from content classification to topic detection and long-document summarization (Broussard, et al., 2019; Ioscote, Gonçalves, & Quadros, 2024; Yang, 2021; Quinonez & Meij, 2024). These capabilities are especially valuable in the Western Balkans, where Albania's EU accession produces extensive laws, progress reports, and parliamentary debates that merit structured, transparent analysis. These capabilities depend on scalable infrastructure. Distributed frameworks like Hadoop and Spark can process streams from portals, social platforms, and newswires in near real time (Lewis, 2014; Singh, 2024). NLP techniques such as named entity recognition, sentiment analysis, topic modeling, and automatic summarization turn unstructured text into comparable evidence across outlets and over time (Ioscote, Gonçalves, & Quadros, 2024; de-Lima-Santos & Salaverría, 2021; Pang & Lee, 2008). Web-based dashboards and visual stories let readers explore sources, timelines, and trends, supporting accountability reporting and strengthening media literacy among younger audiences. Ethical and legal safeguards are essential. Despite the GDPR (European Commission, 2018) and Albania's data protection laws (Parliament of Albania, 2024), practice can lag, and the misuse of AI, including deepfakes and manipulative amplification, threatens trust in journalism. Privacy-preserving pipelines, explicit documentation of lawful bases, algorithmic transparency, and human oversight are therefore essential (Broussard et al., 2019).

The Western Balkans offer a strong use case for this approach. Albania's path to European Union accession generates laws, institutional milestones, and political debate that leave a dense public record. Turning that record into public-facing explanation requires tools that track narratives across outlets and months, show sources, and let readers audit claims. The explanatory web app derived from the book project on Albania's EU discourse is designed for this purpose. Tim Analytics adds a complementary view by aggregating research and policy weak signals. Its

modules highlight top-cited publications, h-index authors, EU-funded projects, triadic patents, and country heatmaps, which place media narratives within a broader research and innovation context (Eulaerts, Grabowska, & Bergamini, 2025). OSoMeNet contributes a third perspective by visualizing how claims and facts check spread across platforms (Indiana University Bloomington, 2025). It integrates the legacy Hoaxy functionality into a single endpoint, which makes diffusion patterns easier to study and compare. Across studies, a consistent practical gap emerges in the evaluation of technology-based media analysis applications.

Methodology

This study uses a comparative design across three web applications: the explanatory app derived from the book project *From Isolation to Integration* (Budini, Idrizi, & Marko, 2025), Tim Analytics (European Commission, Joint Research Centre, 2025), and OSoMeNet (Indiana University Bloomington, 2025). The book-derived application follows a two-tier architecture: a front end with dashboards, search, charts, and controls that let journalists and researchers explore data without coding, and a back end that ingests, processes, and stores data through documented APIs and analytic pipelines with controls for data integrity, security, and performance. The system is modular and scalable, enabling reuse across research and newsroom settings; embedded in routine workflows with saved queries and versioned exports, it supports transparent, data-supported analysis that strengthens accountability and public discourse. Tim Analytics was used to horizon scan publications and projects on fake news detection from 2015 to 2025 (European Commission, Joint Research Centre, 2025), with records deduplicated and aggregated by year and document type. OSoMeNet was used to analyze the most recent three months filtered by study keywords and relevant hashtags (Indiana University Bloomington, 2025). Interaction networks were constructed from replies, mentions, and reposts; communities and hubs were identified in the interface; and node and edge lists were exported to compute reach, cascade size, growth rate, giant component share, modularity, and betweenness of bridging nodes. Retrieval dates, exact queries, and export hashes were recorded in the codebook to ensure reproducibility.

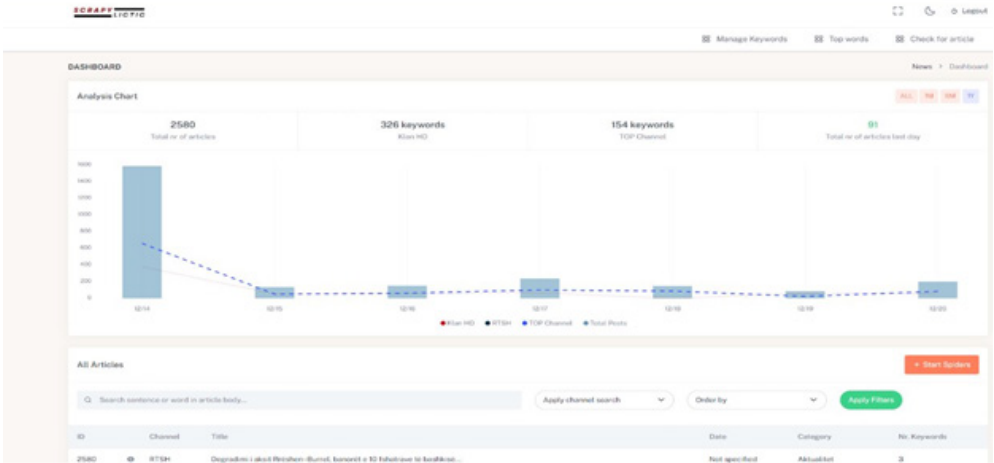
Research results

The book-derived explanatory app surfaces agenda and framing on national TV with reader-facing timelines and source-level context (Budini, Idrizi, & Marko, 2025). Viewed together, the tools show how information moves from broadcast

to public attention: 5GEN explains what television emphasizes and how it frames the story; MediaEyes shows which video segments are likely to be excerpted, misquoted, or taken out of context and provides exact timestamps to check them; AIM-Digital Union reveals whether those narratives gain or lose salience across written sources and institutional outputs. TimAnalytics adds a research-and-policy horizon scan with bibliometric and project signals, and OSoMeNet maps how stories and fact-checks travel online through interaction networks.

Project 1: 5GEN (Figure 1). 5GEN compares coverage of Albania’s EU accession across Klan, Top Channel, and RTSH and turns long broadcast narratives into auditable evidence (Budini, Idrizi, & Marko, 2025). By coupling scraping with NLP for topics, frames, entities, and sentiment, the interface shows who sets the agenda in a given week, which frames dominate, and where tone diverges by outlet. The most useful insight is the structure of differences: frame mixes shift around milestones, tone swings cluster near contentious debates, and spikes in claim-like statements often precede later online controversies. Because each chart links back to the underlying transcript snippet, editors can verify wording and context, which reduces misattribution. In practice, 5GEN functions as a fact-check radar for television, flagging items that warrant follow-up and revealing outlet positioning that might otherwise be inferred only anecdotally.

FIGURE 1: 5GEN

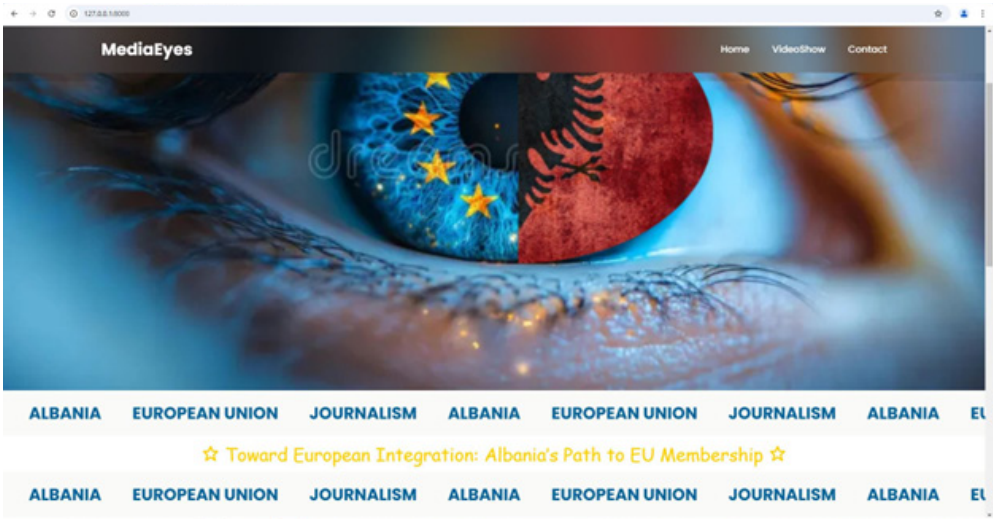


Source: (Budini, Idrizi, & Marko, 2025)

Project 2: MediaEyes (Figure 2). MediaEyes closes a blind spot by converting YouTube content into searchable, time-coded transcripts and layering sentiment, keywords, and entities on top (Budini, Idrizi, & Marko, 2025). The result is a video-first view of narrative building that text crawlers miss. Analysts can jump to the precise second where a term appears and compare segments within and

across channels. Peaks in sentiment and bursts of emotionally charged keywords frequently align with the parts of a clip that later receive the most engagement, which helps explain why certain edits or sound bites travel. The platform supports timestamp-accurate verification and rapid comparison of how different channels tell the same story. Quality controls such as word-error checks and low-confidence flags keep the analysis suitable for citation.

FIGURE 2: MediaEyes



Source: (Budini, Idrizi, & Marko, 2025)

Project 3: AIM-Digital Union (Figure 3). AIM-Digital Union aggregates multi-source news and institutional text, applies transformer-based models for topic discovery, stance, and sentiment, and visualizes trends with drill-downs to documents (Budini, Idrizi, & Marko, 2025). Its core contribution is temporal interpretation. By detecting bursts and linking them to entities, quotes, or policy documents, the system distinguishes episodic heat from durable shifts. This matters for coverage decisions: durable trends merit sustained reporting, while short spikes may call for focused explainers or fact-checks. Because the interface couples timeline spikes with one-click access to sources, it shortens the path from signal to verification and makes claim tracing reproducible.

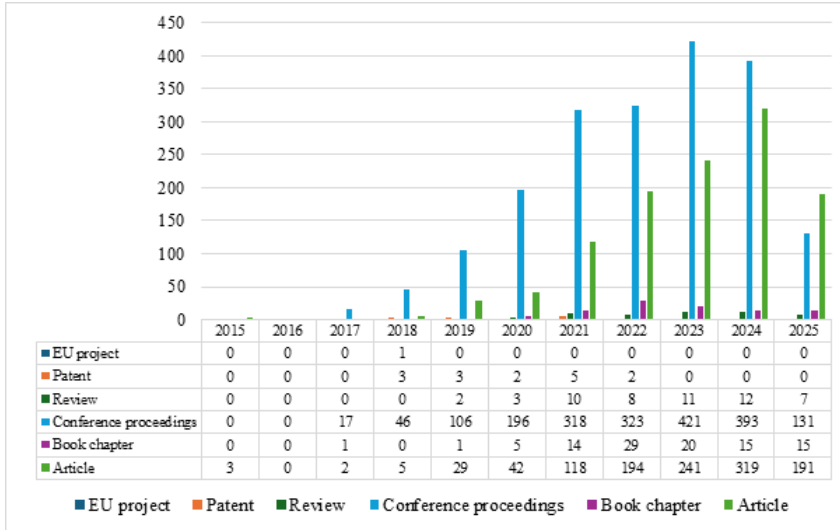
FIGURE 3: AIM-Digital Union



Source: (Budini, Idrizi, & Marko, 2025)

TimAnalytics time series (2015–2025). Figure 4 indicates sustained growth rather than a transient spike in fake-news detection research. Output accelerates after 2018, initially driven by a sharp rise in conference proceedings that signal method prototyping and venue experimentation, and rises again from 2022 to 2024 as journal articles grow steadily, consistent with maturation from conference presentation to archival publication (Eulaerts, Grabowska, & Bergamini, 2025; European Commission, Joint Research Centre, 2025). Reviews increase slowly and remain a small share; book chapters are intermittent; patents and EU projects are rare, suggesting limited commercialization and a research agenda concentrated in academic venues. The apparent decline in 2025 is expected for a partial year and likely reflects indexing lag. Overall, the trajectory is one of scaling followed by consolidation, which positions fake-news detection as an established field undergoing incremental refinement. In this context, Albania should strengthen newsroom data-journalism capacity by adopting modular applications of this kind: deploy front-end dashboards and back-end pipelines that standardize scraping, transcription, NLP, and network analysis; curate local evaluation sets for Albanian and code-switched content; publish saved queries and versioned exports for reproducibility; and pair long-run research signals with short-window diffusion monitoring to time corrections and explanatory coverage.

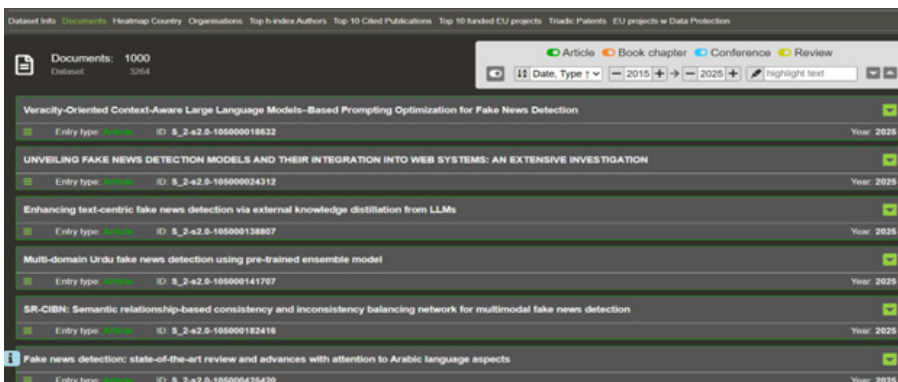
FIGURE 4: Fake news detection 2015-2025



Source: (European Commission, Joint Research Centre, 2025)

TimAnalytics 2025 topical signals. The 2025 set is dominated by work that adapts large language models and multimodal pipelines to detection tasks (European Commission, Joint Research Centre, 2025), including prompting strategies, knowledge distillation, ensembles, and language-specific studies. This has three implications for newsroom use: costs and latency need attention because foundation-model pipelines can be heavy; evaluation must move beyond accuracy to include error analysis by claim type, outlet, and language; and integration into web systems should be a design goal because it improves deployability and supports audit trails.

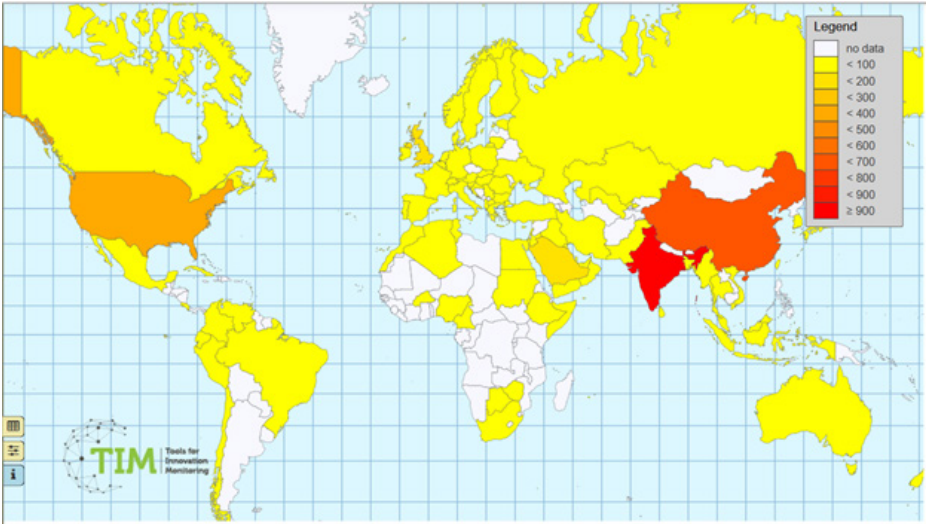
FIGURE 5: Tim Analytics document list for 2025 outputs on fake news detection



Source: (European Commission, Joint Research Centre, 2025)

The TIM heat map shows the highest publication volumes in India and China, strong activity in the United States, and smaller pockets across Europe and East Asia (Figure 6). Countries in the upper legend bins dominate the literature, which means methods, datasets, and benchmarks are often developed and tuned for those contexts and languages. Western and Southern Europe appear uneven, and the Western Balkans are lightly represented or absent, indicating a gap between local detection needs and the global supply of tools (European Commission, Joint Research Centre, 2025). There is a clear research gap in data journalism for Albania and the Western Balkans. Most tools and studies are developed for other languages and media systems, which limits accuracy and transparency on local content. Progress requires locally curated, open corpora that link TV transcripts, YouTube speech-to-text, online articles, and recent social streams; newsroom-centered workflows that combine NLP, network analysis, and human review; and rigorous evaluation on Albanian data with error analysis by outlet, claim type, and language. Studies should test how corrections travel, which hubs amplify them, and which dashboard designs help editors act in time. Ethical compliance must be built in, with documented lawful bases, privacy-preserving processing, and reproducible pipelines that store queries, code, and exports. Investing in this agenda would equip newsrooms to audit claims at scale, time interventions more effectively, and strengthen public trust.

FIGURE 6: Geographic distribution of publications on fake news detection

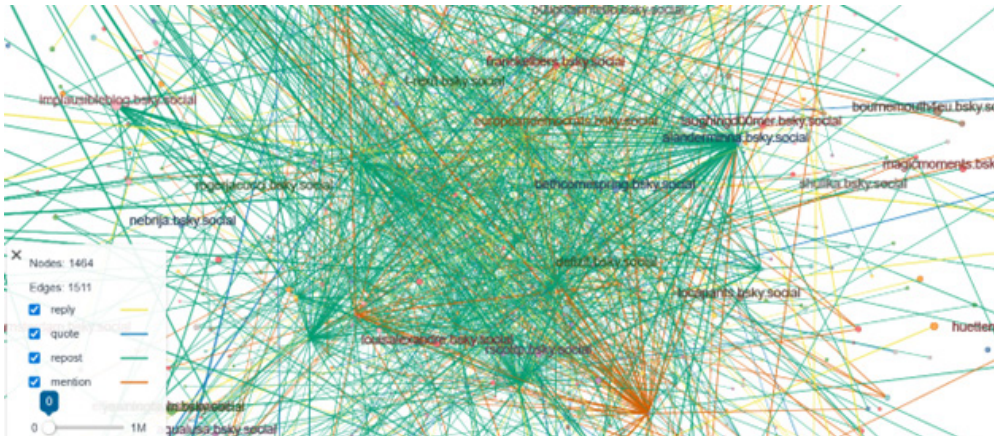


Source: (European Commission, Joint Research Centre, 2025)

OSoMeNet network (last three months). The network covers 1,464 nodes and 1,511 edges (Figure 7). On an undirected projection, the network has an average degree of 2.06 and a density of 0.14%, confirming a sparse structure with one giant

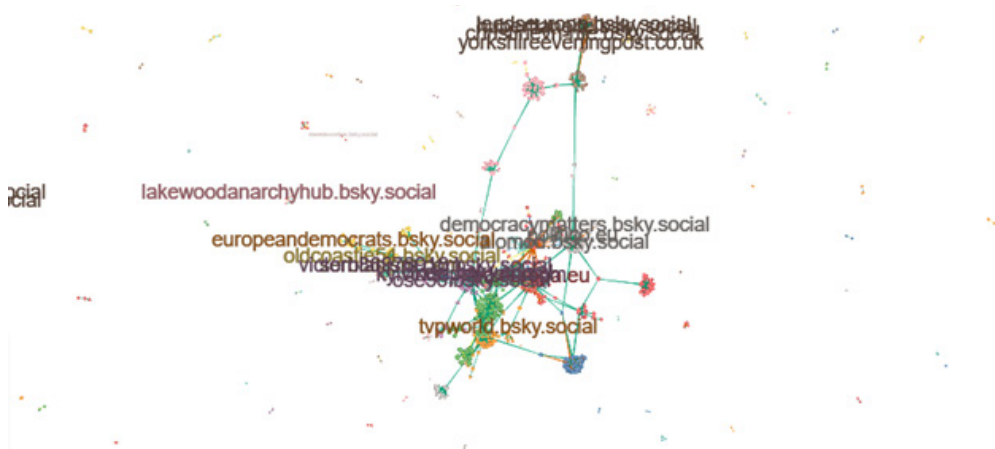
component surrounded by many small clusters and isolates (Indiana University Bloomington, 2025). Community detection shows a modular pattern in which a few mid-sized communities anchor the conversation while numerous micro-clusters remain detached from the core. Edge composition is dominated by mentions, with fewer reposts and replies, which signals broadcast-style tagging and name-checking rather than sustained dialogue. Visually salient hubs, often civic or political accounts, bridge communities and therefore exert outsized control over cross-community reach through high betweenness. The core where communities interlink is the locus where narratives are most likely to jump between groups and scale (Figure 8). For data-journalism use, diffusion is driven more by amplification than by conversation. Corrections and explainers travel farther if they pass through bridging hubs and are packaged with source links, timestamps, and a single verifiable claim. Replies in long threads have limited reach unless a hub reposts or mentions them. Peripheral islands rarely connect to the core, so their content is unlikely to scale without intervention by a hub. Operationally, monitor the core for emerging claim clusters and set simple triggers for action, such as time to interactions or increasing cascade depth, then route interventions through the hubs that repeatedly act as bridges. Results reflect public data for the most recent three months only and exclude private or ephemeral spaces. Automated or coordinated accounts can bias hub detection; rerun the analysis with stricter activity thresholds and report any changes in hub rankings.

FIGURE 7. OSoMeNet interaction network for “European Union”



Source: (Indiana University Bloomington, 2025)

FIGURE 8. Core communities and bridging hubs in the OSoMeNet network



Conclusions

This comparative study evaluated three technology-based media analysis applications to understand information flows across platforms. Taken together, the tools provide complementary evidence: the book-derived explanatory app shows what television emphasizes and how it frames stories (Budini, Idrizi, & Marko, 2025); TimAnalytics situates those themes within longer-run research and policy activity and shows scaling followed by consolidation in fake-news detection from 2015 to 2025, with a 2025 tilt toward large language models and a geography of outputs concentrated outside the Western Balkans (Eulaerts, Grabowska, & Bergamini, 2025; European Commission, Joint Research Centre, 2025); and OSoMeNet reveals near real time diffusion where mentions outweigh replies, underscoring the role of bridging hubs for cross-community reach (Indiana University Bloomington, 2025).

These results indicate that technology-based media-analysis applications improve data journalism outcomes in three ways. First, they strengthen transparency by linking charts to primary sources, recording saved queries, and enabling auditable exports, which allows readers and editors to verify claims and methods. Second, when paired with local evaluation sets, double-coding checks, and error analysis by outlet, claim type, and language, they improve detection accuracy; off-the-shelf models alone are not sufficient for Albanian content. Third, they support timelier corrections by identifying bridging hubs, monitoring core community dynamics, and using simple operational triggers such as time to interactions and cascade depth. The net effect is better targeting of verification work and clearer audit trails for public accountability.

Newsrooms and research partners in Albania should adopt modular applications that combine front-end dashboards with back-end pipelines for

scraping, transcription, NLP, and network analysis. Build and release small, well-documented Albanian evaluation sets that include code-switched content, and report precision, recall, F1, calibration, and per-class errors. Publish retrieval dates, exact queries, and versioned exports to support reproducibility. Pair long-run monitoring of research and policy signals from TimAnalytics with short-window, OSoMeNet checks to time corrections and explanatory pieces. Route corrections through bridging hubs and package them with source links, timestamps, and a single verifiable claim. Plan for the costs and latency of foundation-model pipelines and prefer lightweight adaptations where possible. Provide targeted training so non-programmers can run standard analyses, and embed GDPR-compliant data handling, minimal personal data, and human oversight in routine workflows. Future work should expand local evaluation resources, test model adaptations on Albanian outlets, and integrate additional platforms to improve coverage.

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Framing Europe: Albanian Audiovisual Media and the Discourse of EU Integration _____

Dritan IDRIZI

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5484-663X>

DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES AND COMMUNICATION

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES, EDUCATION AND LIBERAL ARTS

EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY OF TIRANA.

E-mail: dritan.idrizi@uet.edu.al

Abstract

This research investigates the media discourse surrounding Albania's European Union (EU) integration process, focusing on how three major national TV stations, Top Channel, RTSH 1, and Klan TV, frame and communicate this subject to the public. EU integration remains a strategic priority for Albania, symbolizing both a political aspiration and a developmental pathway toward membership by 2030. Using a systematic content analysis of prime-time news edition broadcast, between 1 September and 30 November 2024, the study examines the frequency, tone, and thematic framing of integration-related coverage. Findings show that while the dominant tone across these TVs is optimistic, emphasizing progress, EU support, and governmental commitment, there are variations in the inclusion of critical perspectives, especially when addressing unresolved reforms, political tensions, and anti-corruption measures. Technical and bureaucratic terminology remains prevalent, potentially limiting accessibility for broader audiences. The study underscores the need for balanced narratives, greater source diversity, and more citizen-focused reporting to enhance public understanding of the EU integration process.

Keywords: Media discourse analysis, European Union integration, Journalism, Content framing

Introduction

The process of Albania's integration into the European Union (EU) represents one of the most significant political, economic, and societal transformations in the country's modern history. As a candidate country, Albania has ratified its European objectives through institutional measures and strategic plans, such as the *National Plan for European Integration 2022–2024*, which underscores EU membership as a geostrategic priority at the core of domestic and foreign policy (European Commission, 2022). Also, as a candidate country, Albania's EU trajectory is shaped not only by the implementation of reforms in governance, justice, and the rule of law, but also by how this process is communicated to the public. In this context, the role of the media, particularly national TV stations, is critical in shaping public perceptions by generating informed debate, and fostering transparency. Media discourse does more than simply inform; it frames the narrative, highlights certain aspects of the process, and influences how citizens interpret progress and challenges. To construct a narrative structure, media framing uses both inclusion and omission (Abuhasirah, 2025). Also, Entman (1993) noted that framing involves selecting and highlighting certain aspects of an issue while downplaying others. National television channels, as the most widely consumed news source in Albania, serve as primary intermediaries between political decision-makers and the public. In the Balkan context, studies show that national television remains a primary source of political information, with framing and tone playing a decisive role in shaping citizens' attitudes toward the EU. This research paper focuses on three major national broadcasters Top Channel, RTSH 1, and Klan TV, examining how they portray Albania's EU integration process over a defined monitoring period. By categorizing coverage into positive, neutral, and critical tones, the research seeks to identify prevailing narratives, thematic frames, and editorial tendencies. The findings aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of media framing in transitional political contexts and to provide insights into the relationship between journalism and European integration process.

Research Objectives

This study is guided by the following specific objectives:

- To investigate the media discourse on Albania's EU integration process and assess how this process is represented in national media;

- To identify the dominant themes and framing strategies employed by TV channels in reporting on Albania's EU integration;
- To conduct a content analysis of three prime-time news edition from three national television channels, categorizing coverage as *positive*, *neutral*, or *critical*, based on a rigorous analytical framework.

Methodology

The research employs systematic monitoring of the prime-time news edition broadcast by three major national TV stations - RTSH, Top Channel and Klan TV.

The monitoring period spanned from September 1 – November 30, 2024, encompassing daily main news bulletins. News items pertaining to Albania's EU integration were identified, coded, and analyzed. Each item was classified into one of three categories - positive, neutral, or critical, to evaluate the editorial stance and framing tendencies of the outlets.

Furthermore, quantitative data were compiled to measure the frequency and distribution of integration-related coverage, thereby enabling an assessment of reporting intensity on this subject.

Case Study

Albania, as one of the Western Balkan countries, has taken several steps toward integration into the European Union (EU). In October 2024, Albania opened its first cluster of negotiation chapters with the EU, followed by the opening of negotiations for two additional chapters in December 2024, covering foreign relations, foreign policy, security, and defense. This process is seen as an opportunity for Albania to achieve its goal of EU membership by 2030.

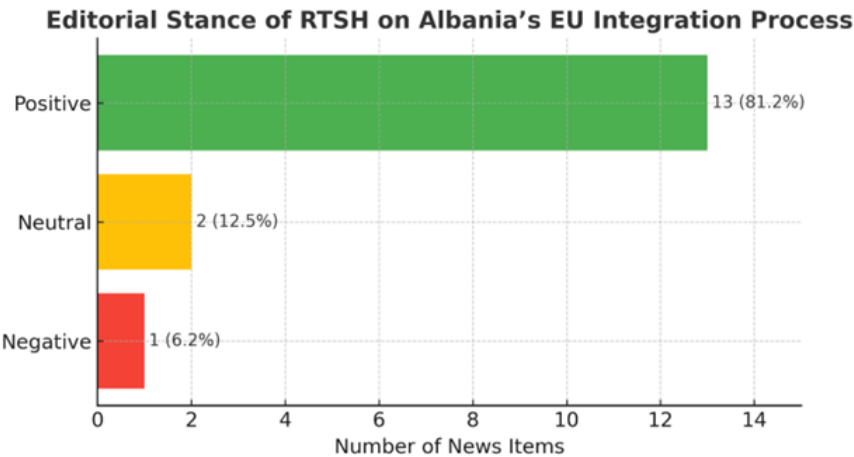
In this context, media discourse surrounding the integration process has played a crucial role in informing the public and shaping perceptions of this journey. RTSH, Top Channel, and TV Klan nationally licensed and among the most widely followed TV outlets in Albania were therefore selected as the sources for monitoring. During the months of September, October, and November 2024, the prime-time news edition of these channels were monitored to obtain a clear overview of the content and approaches adopted in covering the integration process.

The content analysis of integration-related news on these three channels has enabled the identification of trends and patterns in the use of specific media terms. The frequency of terms such as "*opening of negotiations*," "*acceleration of integration*," "*negotiating chapters*," and "*economic reform*" is significant for understanding how the media portrays this process and constructs a public image of it.

Media Discourse on Albania’s EU Integration

In general, news items classified as *positive* highlighted Albania’s achievements and progress in the integration process, while *critical* reports emphasized the obstacles and challenges the country faces. *Neutral* coverage combined elements of both, offering a more balanced perspective on the situation.

FIGURE 1: News Approaches on EU Integration in RTSH TV station, (September 1 – November 30, 2024, main news edition at 20:00)



In Figure 1 (OpenAI, 2025), a predominance of positive coverage in RTSH reporting on Albania’s EU integration is evident. Out of 17 selected reports during the three-month monitoring period, 14 adopted a positive approach, only 1 was negative, and 2 were classified as neutral, based on the analysis of terminology used.

The prevailing narrative regarding Albania’s integration process focuses largely on the country’s progress, acceleration of the process, and its advancement beyond neighboring states in the Western Balkans. One example is the report of 15 October 2024, titled “*We Were Behind Macedonia, Today Ahead of the Entire Balkans*,” featuring an interview with Prime Minister Rama. This headline underscores Albania’s advancement in the integration process in comparison to North Macedonia and other regional countries.

During the monitored period, reporting tones were predominantly enthusiastic about Albania’s EU integration. The terminology and keywords used were heavily technical, with frequent references to institutions and international actors involved in the process. All reports were linked to diplomatic developments, meetings, conferences, official statements, interviews, and formal reports - often placed

at the beginning of news bulletins, reflecting adherence to an official agenda in coverage.

While the use of bureaucratic and formal terms aims to convey the importance of the information, it often increases ambiguity and confusion for audiences. Complex and technical expressions such as “*assistance packages*,” “*working groups*,” “*regional integration*,” and “*multilateral aid*” may be difficult for viewers unfamiliar with the terminology of international politics, economics, and diplomacy. This institutional communication style, when replicated in media reporting, can create the perception that integration-related issues are highly technical and removed from citizens’ direct concerns.

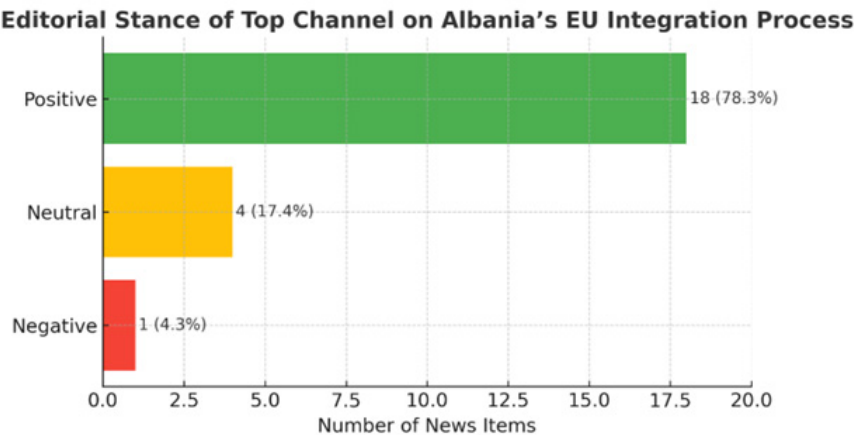
Frequent terms such as “*negotiations*,” “*chapters*,” “*growth plan*,” or “*reforms*” tend to frame the integration process as a purely technical and institutional journey. RTSH data analysis underscores continuous progress and strong EU support for Albania, conveyed in an optimistic tone consistent with the current government’s political stance. Coverage of EU-related events prioritizes positive developments, while challenges faced by Albania are less frequently emphasized. Terms like “*support*,” “*progress*,” and “*readiness*” highlight the EU’s commitment to assist Albania, as illustrated in reports from 15 October and 7 November 2024, which stress the opening of negotiation chapters and the authorities’ optimism about concluding the process by 2027. Similarly, terms such as “*reform*” and “*progress in implementing reforms*” are framed as evidence of Albania’s advancement.

The narrative of EU support remains dominant, emphasizing sustained EU engagement and assistance for Albania. This strategy helps construct a strong image of the integration process and a positive assessment of Albania’s membership prospects.

The optimistic tone on Albania’s EU integration, highlighting progress and EU backing aligns with the government’s strategy to foster a favorable public perception. Much like the official narrative, RTSH’s coverage places strong emphasis on meeting conditions and opening chapters as indicators of progress. While the positive framing is often presented as a consensus, the findings suggest that diversifying the narrative would be beneficial. This includes incorporating a wider range of perspectives and critically examining factors that could delay or hinder further progress, as well as exploring potential solutions to overcome these challenges.

Top Channel News Edition
(September 1 – November 30, 2024, main news edition at 19:30)

FIGURE 2: News Approaches on EU Integration in Top Channel



As illustrated in Figure 2 (OpenAI, 2025), the news reports on Albania’s EU integration broadcast in Top Channel’s prime-time news edition are predominantly positive, although the discourse often contains neutral and critical nuances. Despite an overall optimistic presentation of the integration process, the language employed is generally neutral and, in some instances, critical, particularly in relation to the fulfillment of conditions and criteria for reforms, the fight against corruption, and compliance with EU requirements concerning enlargement, funding, and the broader advancement of the integration process.

According to monitoring data, a total of 23 reports were broadcast during the assessed period. Notably, due to the intensification of integration-related events and activities in October, the number of reports increased significantly, reflecting heightened media attention on Albania’s EU integration during this period.

While the overarching narrative is relatively positive, the treatment of reform issues and political commitments tends to be more neutral in tone and occasionally critical, given the variations in thematic coverage. The news items are divided between positive portrayals of progress and reports highlighting political tensions. For instance, the reports aired on 15 October, 23 October, 29 October, and 7 November 2024, with titles such as “Accession Talks Open,” “Albania, €920 Million from the EU,” and “Albania–EU Meeting” – all these titles adopt a positive stance that emphasizes progress and the potential benefits of EU membership. The frequent use of terms such as “negotiation chapters,” “opening of negotiations,” “reform plan,” and “EU integration” conveys a sense of continuous progress and

clear commitment by Albanian authorities to meeting EU standards. Reports on judicial reform and economic development are framed around positive developments, while simultaneously stressing the need to meet additional conditions to accelerate the process.

Conversely, the report of October 30, 2024, covering the Democratic Party's blockade of the integration resolution, marked a notable shift in tone and approach. This report was more critical, highlighting domestic political tensions as obstacles to EU integration. Terms such as "*blockage*" and "*obstacle*" introduced a negative framing, emphasizing the disruptive impact of internal politics on the integration process. Similarly, other headlines such as "*U.S. State Department Official in Tirana: Keep Corruption Under Control to Join the EU*," "*Reforms Required Before EU Provides Funds*," "*EU: Evaluation, Criticism, and Tasks*," and "*EU Conditions for €920 Million*", reflect a more neutral or critical discourse.

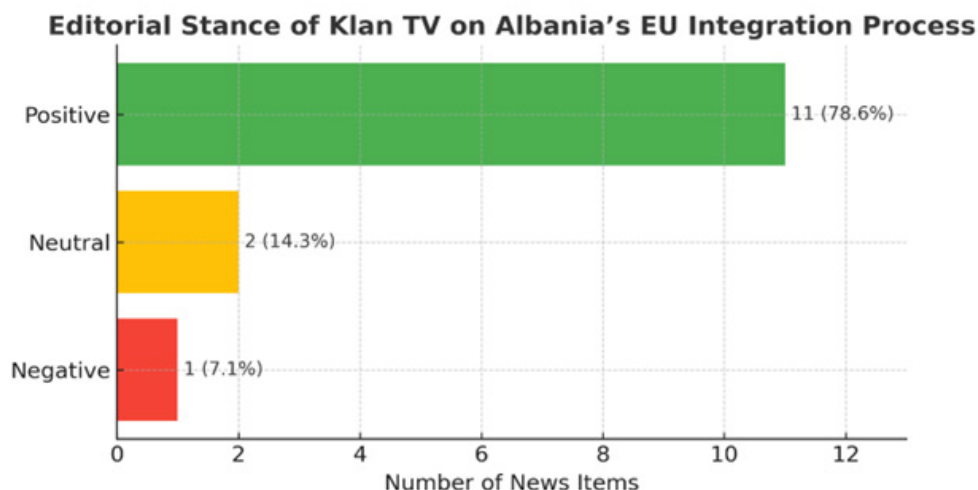
From a critical discourse analysis perspective, positively framed reports construct integration as an achievable opportunity, with repeated references to "*opening of negotiations*," "*successful reforms*," and "*first chapters opened*." By employing terms such as "*progress*," "*support*," "*hope*," and "*commitment*," these reports generate a tangible perception of integration as both realistic and imminent, fostering public confidence in the process. Conversely, the use of terms such as "*blockage*" and "*obstacle*" in politically charged reports conveys uncertainty about the country's trajectory toward irreversible integration.

The frequency analysis of key terms indicates a tendency to present a progressive narrative of Albania's EU integration. Nevertheless, the absence of political consensus and the slow pace of reforms also emerge as obstacles, producing a more nuanced and complex portrayal of integration-related coverage on Top Channel. It is evident that political dynamics dominate the coverage, although in some cases critical emphasis is placed on economic shortcomings, the justice system, and reform implementation, with particular attention to calls for tackling corruption, often articulated through references to EU diplomats.

Finally, the 'actors' most frequently featured in Top Channel's integration-related reports are high-level EU officials and senior Albanian politicians, with limited inclusion of experts and citizens expressing their views on the country's integration process. A broader diversification of information sources, alongside greater coverage of non-political and socio-economic aspects of integration, would expand the perspective of media discourse on the EU.

TV Klan News Edition (September 1 – November 30, 2024, main news edition at 19:30)

FIGURE 3: News Approaches on EU Integration in TV Klan



As shown in Figure 3 (OpenAI, 2025), the coverage of Albania's EU integration on TV Klan is also dominated by a positive narrative. A total of 14 reports directly addressing the integration process were identified five in September, five in October, and four in November. Of these, 11 reports adopted a positive approach, while one was classified as negative and another as neutral.

The reports frequently adopt a personalized framing, with headlines such as *"Von der Leyen: EU Commissioners Dedicated to the Balkans," "Von der Leyen Meets Western Balkan Leaders," "Chief Negotiator: Integration Reforms by 2027,"* and *"Negotiations, Hasani: To Be Concluded by 2030."* Coverage is often centered on statements and visits by Prime Minister Rama, such as *"Rama: Russian and Iranian Disinformation Through Social Media,"* accompanying reports on the appointment of an EU Commissioner dedicated to the Balkans, or *"Rama on Official Visit to Hungary,"* accompanying reports on Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán's support for accelerating Albania's EU accession, or *"Rama Attends Borrell's Meeting with EU Leaders,"* covering discussions on geopolitical challenges and EU integration with Western Balkan prime ministers.

However, there are instances when the narrative shifts toward neutrality or criticism. The report of October 30, 2024 on the European Commission's progress report adopted a more neutral tone, stressing the need for intensified reforms, particularly in combating corruption and strengthening the judiciary. Although Albania's achievements were positively acknowledged, unresolved issues were also

emphasized. This type of coverage presents a balanced stance between support and constructive criticism. The report further highlighted ongoing concerns regarding media freedom, noting stagnation and the European Commission's observation that last year's recommendations remained unimplemented.

Thus, while the prevailing narrative in TV Klan's coverage of Albania's EU integration is positive, focused on government efforts to advance reforms and progress, there are instances of neutrality and critical tone due to persistent challenges in the rule of law and anti-corruption measures.

Analysis of titles and content reveals that reports on high-level meetings such as those of Von der Leyen with Western Balkan leaders, or Rama's official visits to EU member states, aim to underscore EU support for Albania and progress toward accession. This pattern is consistent across most selected reports, where terms such as "*progress*," "*support*," "*reforms*," and "*growth plan*" frequently appear, reinforcing an optimistic vision of Albania's European future.

For example, the report of 2 September 2024, titled "*Von der Leyen: EU Commissioners Dedicated to the Balkans*," employed a distinctly positive narrative, highlighting efforts to accelerate Balkan integration and the potential benefits for Albania from a €6 billion growth plan. Similarly, the report of 26 September 2024 on the opening of negotiation chapters stressed that Albania had met the necessary criteria, portraying this as a significant milestone toward EU membership.

TV Klan's style of presentation is characterized by frequent repetition of terms designed to consolidate the perception of Albania's progress and commitment to integration. Key terms such as "*reforms*," "*negotiations*," "*EU*," and "*Western Balkans*" recur systematically to reinforce the country's alignment with EU standards.

Another notable stylistic element is the use of quotations and statements from high-level leaders, such as EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and Prime Minister Rama. Their inclusion creates a direct connection to international authority and conveys a strong message of EU support. In reports covering Rama's visits and reform discussions, these quotations reinforce the perception of Albania as an active and committed participant in the integration process.

Recommendations

From this study, several recommendations emerge for improving media reporting on Albania's EU integration process:

Clarity and simplification of information: The media should aim to use clearer, more accessible language for citizens, particularly for those who are not closely engaged with technical matters or international negotiations.

Diversification of media approaches: Coverage should provide a balanced view that reflects not only achievements but also the challenges and setbacks Albania may encounter, thereby creating a realistic and comprehensive public perception.

Explanation of concrete impacts for citizens: It is essential for the media to highlight the tangible effects of each stage of the integration process on citizens' daily lives, including implications for the economy, justice, freedoms, and citizens' rights.

These recommendations would contribute to more accessible and balanced reporting on Albania's path toward EU membership.

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Perception of Media and Integration: Questionnaire Administration and Data Collection

Erisela MARKO

ASSISTANT LECTURER

DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES AND COMMUNICATION

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES, EDUCATION AND LIBERAL ARTS

EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY OF TIRANA

TIRANA ALBANIA

erisela.marko@uet.edu.al

Abstract

This paper explores the role of media discourse in shaping public perception regarding Albania's European Union (EU) integration through a comprehensive quantitative analysis. Based on a structured survey of 347 participants across six Albanian universities, the study investigates media consumption habits, platform preferences, and public perceptions of media credibility and influence in covering EU-related topics. The research employs a mixed-methods approach within a quantitative framework, utilizing descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and comparative methodology to examine attitudes across demographic and professional variables. Key findings indicate that traditional media, particularly television, remains the primary source for EU-related news (cited by 65% of respondents), though social and online media platforms are gaining significant traction, especially among younger audiences (18-25 age group). While 43% of participants acknowledge the media's constructive role in raising awareness and supporting EU integration, substantial concerns persist about misinformation—primarily attributed to social and online media platforms (68% of respondents). The study identifies critical challenges including political and economic pressures on media content, highlighting the urgent

need for comprehensive media training, enhanced ethical standards, and improved transparency in reporting. This research underscores the necessity for a responsible media ecosystem that effectively informs and meaningfully engages the public in EU integration discourse, with comparative insights drawn from similar processes in Western Balkan countries.

Keywords: *EU Integration, Media Discourse, Public Perception, Albania, Quantitative Survey, Media Credibility, Western Balkans, Democratic Transition*

Introduction

This study employs a quantitative methodology to enable the collection of numerical data and their analysis through statistical techniques. Quantitative research, according to Bouma and Atkinson (1995), is characterized by a “structural, logical, measured, and broad” approach (p. 208). This form of research allows for the gathering of accurate and reliable information through measurement tools such as questionnaires and surveys. The quantitative method is particularly useful for collecting objective data and conducting analyses aimed at identifying patterns and trends within a defined population.

One of the main methods used in this study is the administration of a questionnaire containing 23 closed-ended questions. These questions are structured to offer clear and measurable answers that can be processed statistically.

The questionnaire was administered in two ways: in person and electronically via Microsoft Forms, with the aim of reaching as many participants as possible and ensuring a broad and representative sample. Participants included university students and media professionals, allowing for a comparative analysis between two groups with different experiences and attitudes regarding media and Albania’s European integration.

In terms of research design, this study applies a comparative approach which, according to Bouma and Atkinson (1995), involves analyzing two or more groups simultaneously identifying differences and similarities (p. 117). In this case, the comparison was made between students at the European University of Tirana and individuals employed in the media, as well as those not directly connected to the media. The main objective is to identify differences in perceptions and attitudes among these groups concerning the media discourse surrounding Albania’s EU integration process.

The context of the study is the European University of Tirana, which served as one of the primary sources of participants. The questionnaire was distributed via Microsoft Forms and was also sent to other universities in Albania, such

as the Universities of Elbasan, Shkodër, Durrës, Vlorë, and Korçë, to include a broader range of individuals and ensure a more diverse sample. This selection of multiple universities and departments, including the Faculty of Humanities and the Departments of Journalism and Public Relations, allowed for the collection of data from both individuals with deep media knowledge and those outside the field, representing the public.

Regarding data collection, the questionnaire was divided into two sections. The first section included general questions about participants' relationships with the media, such as basic information on media usage and preferences. The second section focused on the topic of Albania's EU integration and how these issues are reflected and discussed in both traditional and online media. Participants provided information about the types of media they follow, the time they dedicate to media, and the content they prefer, thereby enabling an in-depth analysis of their media consumption habits and their views on important political and social issues.

The questionnaire was administered from October through December 15, 2024. After the data collection period ended, all responses were processed and analyzed to draw final conclusions about the perceptions and attitudes of different groups regarding the European integration process and the role of media.

However, this study has some limitations. First, most of the participants came from universities and from specific departments such as journalism and public relations. The total number of participants is limited to 347 individuals, of whom 222 are part of the general audience and only 20 are media professionals. This number may not be sufficient to draw general conclusions applicable to the broader population. Furthermore, the study does not include a balanced sample of individuals employed in the media and students from other disciplines who may hold different perceptions (Budini, B., Idrizi, D. & Marko, E. 2025, pp. 67-83).

The relationship between media discourse and public opinion formation during democratic transitions and European integration processes has been documented in academic literature (Vltmer, 2013; Bajomi-Lázár, 2014).

This study contributes to the growing body of research on media influence in EU enlargement processes by providing empirical evidence from Albania's unique context. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from political communication theory (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018) and media systems theory (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), this research examines how different media platforms and formats contribute to public understanding and support for EU integration.

Methodology

Research Design and Philosophical Approach

This study employs a post-positivist research paradigm, utilizing primarily quantitative methods while acknowledging the interpretive dimensions of social phenomena (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The research design follows a cross-sectional survey approach with comparative elements, allowing for both descriptive analysis and inferential statistics to examine relationships between variables.

The methodological framework draws on Bryman's (2016) guidance for social research, emphasizing systematic data collection, statistical analysis, and generalizability within defined parameters. The comparative dimension of the study aligns with Lijphart's (1971) comparative method, focusing on "most similar systems design" by examining different demographic and professional groups within the same national context.

Population and Sampling Strategy

Target Population: The study targets Albanian university students, media professionals, and academic community members aged 18-65, representing approximately 250,000 individuals across the country's higher education institutions.

Sampling Frame: Six major Albanian universities were selected using stratified purposive sampling:

- European University of Tirana (primary site)
- University of Elbasan "Aleksandër Xhuvani"
- University of Shkodër "Luigj Gurakuqi"
- University of Durrës "Aleksandër Moisiu"
- University of Vlorë "Ismail Qemali"
- University of Korçë "Fan S. Noli"

(<https://www.instat.gov.al/sq/temat/tregu-i-punes-dhe-arsimi/arsimi/#tab2>)

Administration Methods:

1. Electronic Distribution: Microsoft Forms platform
2. In-Person Administration: Paper-based in selected classrooms

Data Interpretation: Analysis of the Questionnaire on Albania’s EU Integration and the Role of the Media

To analyze the data collected from the questionnaire regarding media discourse on Albania’s integration into the European Union (EU), it is essential to conduct comparisons and correlations among the variables and interpret the results accordingly. Our analysis focuses on the main trends emerging from the data, considering the types of media, audience habits, and varying perceptions of the media’s impact on the EU integration process.

This approach allows us to highlight how different factors—such as age, profession, and media preferences—influence the way messages about EU integration are perceived and communicated through the media. Furthermore, analyzing the role of the media helps identify both positive and negative influences these institutions have on shaping public opinion and their credibility regarding this important political and social process.

Overall, interpreting the data will provide a deeper understanding of how media discourse affects perceptions of Albania’s EU integration and will contribute to developing more effective communication strategies to improve public support and information dissemination in this field.

Participant Demographics

Category	Number	Percentage (%)
Students	256	73.8
Students & employed	53	15.3
Media Professionals	20	5.8
Other Employed	18	5.2

Age Distribution:

- 18-25 years: 68.3%
- 26-35 years: 19.6%
- 36-45 years: 8.4%
- 46+ years: 3.7%

Geographic Distribution:

- Tirana: 52.4%
- Elbasan: 14.7%
- Shkodër: 12.1%
- Other cities: 20.8%

Media Consumption Patterns and Platform Preferences

Television Channel Preferences: The data reveals concentrated viewership among leading commercial channels:

- TOP Channel: 40.1% (139 respondents) Known for investigative journalism and political programming
- KLAN TV: 39.2% (136 respondents) Popular for news and entertainment content
- RTSH (Public Television) & others: 20.7% (72 respondents) State broadcaster

Digital Media Consumption: Social media usage shows generational patterns:

- Facebook: 89.3% (daily usage)
- Instagram: 76.4%
- Twitter: 23.1%
- TikTok: 45.8% (primarily 18-25 age group)

Media Platforms for EU Integration Information

Media Channels Used for EU Integration News

- Television (highest)
- Online Media
- Social Networks
- Newspapers, Magazines, Podcasts (lowest)

Primary Information Channels:

1. Television: 67.4%
2. Online news portals: 54.2%
3. Social media: 48.7%
4. Newspapers: 23.6%
5. Radio: 18.4%
6. Podcasts: 12.4%

Perceptions of Media Credibility and Misinformation

Perceived Misinformation Sources: Survey participants identified misinformation prevalence across platforms:

Platform	Respondents Identifying Misinformation	Percentage
Social Media	236	68.0%
Online News Sites	176	50.7%
Television	69	19.9%
Print Media	45	13.0%

Media Regulation and Ethical Concerns

Media Platforms Needing Regulation and Ethical Codes

- Social Networks (highest)
- Television
- Online News Sites

Media Impact on EU Integration Awareness and Attitudes

Perceived Media Influence on EU Integration Support:

- 43.2% believe detailed media coverage raises public awareness
- 38.9% see media as influential in shaping public opinion and policies
- 56.8% agree media reports impartially on EU institutions' transparency
- 52.7% recognize media's role in educating citizens on EU policies

Statistical Relationships: Correlation analysis reveals significant relationships between media consumption patterns and EU integration support:

- Television news consumption positively correlated with EU support
- Social media consumption shows weak negative correlation
- Professional media background strongly predicts EU integration knowledge

The Ratio of Students to Media Professionals

According to the data, 256 participants are students, while 53 are both employed and students. Most of participants belong to the media audience, with only 20 individuals identified as media professionals. This distribution reflects the

predominance of students and young individuals in the study, suggesting that they are more likely to consume media passively without professional engagement.

In this context, comparing the groups of students and media professionals can provide valuable insights into the impact of media on audiences not directly involved in the media profession versus those who are part of the media industry. Media professionals may possess a deeper understanding of media content and discourse, which could influence their perceptions differently from those of the general audience.

Media Trust Patterns:

- Media professionals show higher skepticism toward social media
- Students demonstrate more platform diversity in information seeking
- Both groups express concerns about political influence on media content

Preferences for Television Channels and Social Media

Forty-nine percent of participants follow TOP Channel, while 39% watch Klan TV, with the remaining audience tuning into RTSH. These data indicate the dominance of certain traditional channels, such as TOP Channel and Klan TV, which are preferred by the audience. This may reflect a tendency to consume news and information through television, which remains a primary source of information for many individuals, despite the growing presence of social media.

This information can be compared with the results from question 5, where social media platforms are reported as more frequently followed (250 responses), suggesting a trend toward diversification in media consumption. Social networks now hold an increasingly important position, especially in individuals' daily lives.

The creation of the internet made necessary not only the invention of new techniques but also of new social processes (Maigret, E. 2012, p. 321). As E. Maigret argues, the internet is a medium in the narrow sense of the term, a technical support for communication. Its possibilities are linked to its character as a multimedia tool that combines sound, image, and text, allowing us to find what we want (pp. 299–301).

Time Spent on Media and Use of Online Media

Responses to question 6 show that a large portion of respondents spend between 1- and 2-hours consuming media, while a significant group (30%) spend more than 3 to 4 hours engaged with media content. This result confirms the tendency of avid media consumers to be influenced primarily by the opportunities offered by online media and social networks, which are more accessible and loaded with diverse and abundant content.

Perceptions of Misinformation in the Media

Misinformation is a key issue reflected in the responses to question 8, where 236 participants believe that social media is the primary source of misinformation, while 176 perceive this phenomenon mainly in online media. This indicates a widespread perception of the impact of misinformation within these two media groups, which are more present in individuals' daily lives. On the other hand, only 69 participants consider television to be a source of misinformation.

This perception may be linked to the nature of information disseminated on social media, which is often more ambiguous and less filtered than the content provided by traditional media outlets.

Selection of Media for Information on EU Integration

In question 7, which examines the primary sources of information regarding Albania's EU integration process, television emerges as the most selected medium, followed by online media and social networks. This result aligns with the trend observed in the data on television channel viewership, where TOP Channel and KLAN TV dominate. Television has been described as "the modern version of the campfire, around which the family gathers to listen to news and various stories." It is a medium that provides a complete package of news through both images and audio. As the number of information channels increases, viewers can select a single, specialized channel—one with specific themes—that confirms their personal worldview and corresponds to their lifestyle (Bergstrom, B. 2010, pp. 79–80).

Social media is also utilized, primarily for discussions and the rapid dissemination of news that may offer a more immediate and possibly more direct experience for the audience.

This supports the idea that television remains a key source of information for significant national topics such as EU integration, while also playing an important role in shaping public opinion.

Perceptions of the Role of the Media and Transparency

Responses to questions 12, "How does the media help increase awareness and support for European integration?" and 13, "What are the impacts of media information on public opinion and integration policies?" reveal that a large portion of respondents believe the media can enhance awareness and support for EU integration by providing detailed and analytical information.

At the same time, it is important to note that a considerable group thinks the media can also have a negative impact by increasing confusion and uncertainty. This perception is related to the possibility that media outlets may be influenced by political interests and specific group agendas.

Recommendations for Improving Media Support for EU Integration

In question 21, “How can the media be supported to improve quality and ethics in reporting on European integration?”, participants suggest that the media should benefit from training and resources to enhance reporting standards and support EU integration. This highlights the need for education and the improvement of professional capacities to report objectively and impartially, which could increase media credibility and help disseminate accurate and reliable information about the integration process.

In summary, the data from the questionnaires reflect a broad and complex picture of the media landscape and its impact on public perception of Albania’s EU integration. They show that traditional media, such as television, remain dominant, but the use of social media is also rising, bringing new implications for shaping opinion and perceptions of transparency and the integration process.

Some key recommendations arising from the questionnaire include improving journalists’ professional skills, ensuring balanced and accurate information, and safeguarding media independence through adherence to ethical codes and self-regulation processes.

FIG.1

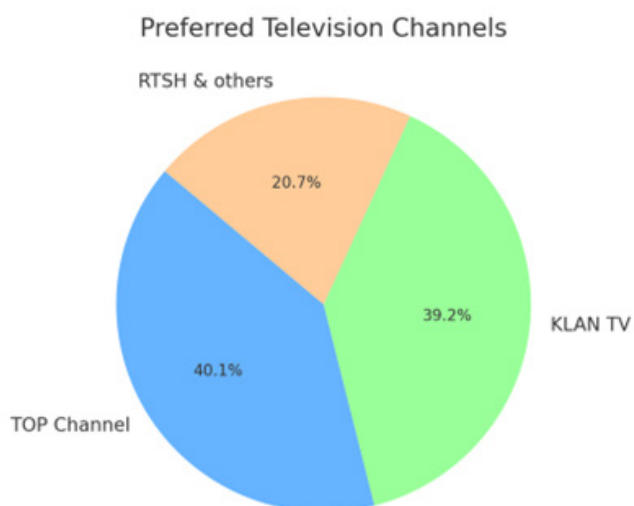


FIG. 2

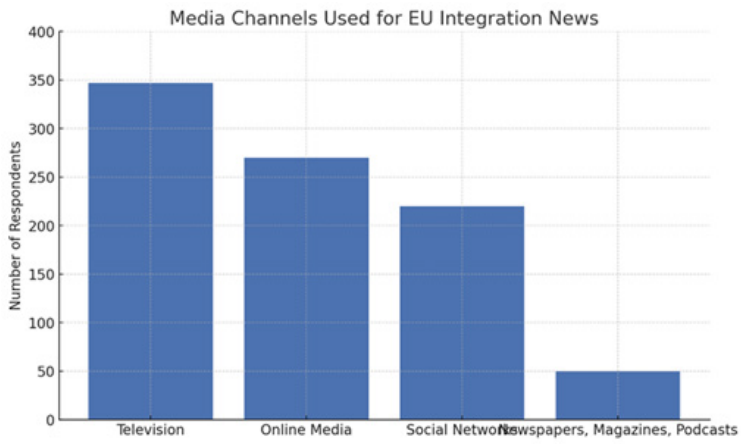


FIG. 3

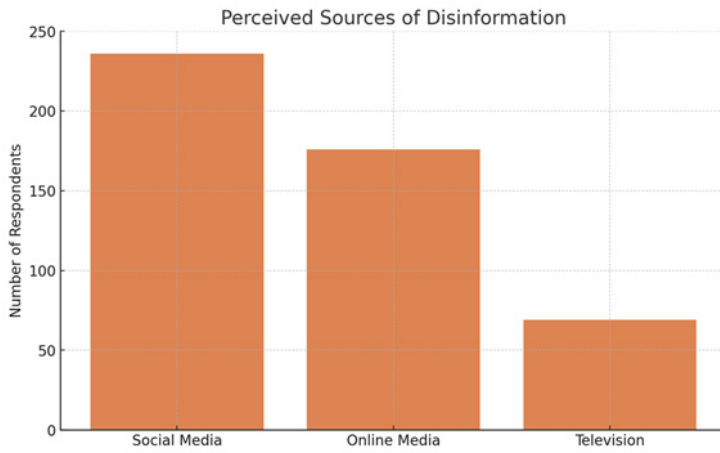
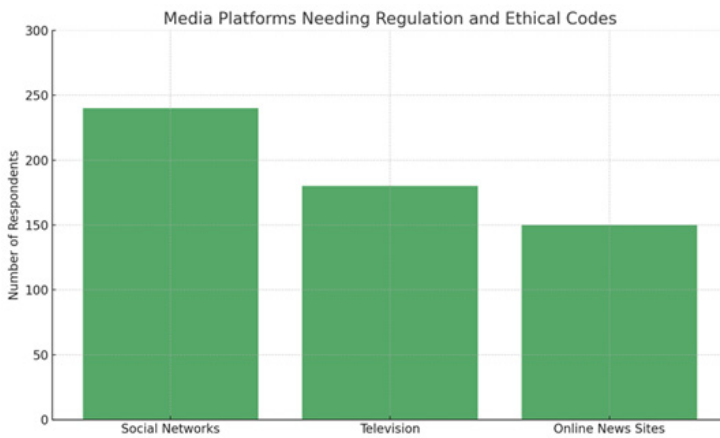


FIG. 4



1. **Preferred Television Channels** – Pie chart showing TOP Channel (40.1%), KLAN TV (39.2%), and others (20.7%).
2. **Media Channels Used for EU Integration News** – Bar chart with Television leading, followed by Online Media, Social Networks, and lastly Newspapers/ Podcasts.
3. **Perceived Sources of Disinformation** – Bar chart showing social media as the top source, followed by Online Media, then TV.
4. **Media Platforms Needing Regulation and Ethical Codes** – Bar chart with Social Networks rated highest for need of regulation, then TV, then Online News.

Key Findings Summary

This comprehensive analysis of media discourse surrounding Albania's EU integration reveals several critical insights:

1. **Media Platform Hierarchy:** Television maintains primacy as the most trusted source for EU-related information, while social media platforms face significant credibility challenges despite widespread usage.
2. **Generational Digital Divide:** Clear age-stratified differences in media consumption patterns suggest evolving information ecosystems that require platform-specific communication strategies.
3. **Misinformation Concerns:** Widespread perception of misinformation, particularly on digital platforms, indicates urgent need for media literacy initiatives and platform accountability measures.
4. **Professional Knowledge Gap:** Significant differences between media professionals and general public in EU integration understanding highlight the importance of effective knowledge transfer mechanisms.

Conclusion

The study underscores the significant role of media discourse in framing Albania's EU integration process. Television remains the most trusted source, although social media is extensively used despite concerns over misinformation.

Political polarization within Albanian media creates divergent narratives that affect public trust and perception.

Efforts to improve media independence, regulate misinformation, and foster balanced reporting are essential to support Albania's EU integration journey and democratic development. Future studies should explore longitudinal trends and

broader demographic samples to deepen understanding of media's role in political integration processes in transitional democracies.

This research contributes to the growing body of literature on media systems in transitional democracies and EU enlargement processes. By providing empirical evidence from Albania's unique context, the study enhances understanding of how media discourse shapes public opinion in candidate countries, offering insights relevant to both academic researchers and policy practitioners working on European integration and democratic development

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Enhancing the Image: Turkish Public Diplomacy Organisations in the Western Balkans¹

Jan NIEMIEC

PHD CANDIDATE

JAGIELLONIAN UNIVERSITY IN KRAKÓW

jan.niemiec@student.uj.edu.pl

Abstract

The main scientific objective of this paper is to analyse and assess activities of Turkish public diplomacy organisations in the Western Balkans. Since the Justice and Development Party came to power in 2002, Turkey has been gradually increasing its involvement in neighbouring regions. In this context, the government-controlled institutions, tasked with promoting Turkish political values abroad, have been providing support to traditional diplomatic services. In relations with the Western Balkans, Turkey's aim is to enhance mutual cooperation based on shared historical, religious and cultural ties. Given the multifaceted nature of the Turkish political model, the role of public diplomacy in foreign policy doctrine of the AKP has been systematically growing in recent years.

Adopting a comprehensive research perspective, this paper explores the relationship between Turkey and the Western Balkans, using activities of Turkish public diplomacy organisations as a reference point. In order to identify key aspects related to actions of certain institutions that promote Turkey's soft power in the region, a broad range of primary sources and literature on the subject have been reviewed. This paper employs qualitative research methods and attempts to

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answer the research question regarding the effectiveness of image-building initiatives undertaken by Turkey through its public diplomacy organisations.

Keywords: Turkey, Western Balkans, Justice and Development Party, public diplomacy, regional cooperation

Introduction

Since 2002, Turkey has been led by the Justice and Development Party (tur. *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP), which is rooted in the right-wing political spectrum. In contrast to its Western-oriented predecessors, the AKP has adopted a much more multifaceted and active foreign policy model. In this regard, the Turkish government sought to strengthen the state's international position by making significant improvements to relations with other neighbouring regions (e.g. the Middle East, North Africa, South Caucasus) (Wasilewski, 2023, pp. 120–129). The term “Western Balkans”, which in political science is most often used to denote states such as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, also figured prominently in the AKP's political strategy. Due to robust historical, cultural and (to a certain extent) religious affinities, this region has been identified by the authorities in Ankara as a potential area of cooperation. Capitalising on the EU's erratic approach to enlargement policy, Turkey has endeavoured to portray itself as a nation committed to stabilisation and sustainable development of this region (Türbedar, 2011, pp. 140–144). In addition to conventional diplomatic services, an extensive public diplomacy apparatus functions in the Western Balkans to support politicians in achieving Turkish foreign policy goals. Citing the legacy of the Ottoman Empire, these institutions engage in a variety of initiatives at different levels (ranging from intergovernmental to municipal) to facilitate promotion of Turkey's soft power in the region (Ağır, 2022, pp. 43–44). The decision was taken to select the Western Balkans as the subject of this study, given that it was one of the first foreign regions in which the AKP began to implement its political vision.

The primary scientific objective of this paper is to analyse and evaluate activities of Turkish public diplomacy organisations in the six Western Balkan states between 2002 and 2022, a period that almost exactly corresponds to five full election cycles in Turkey. It was decided to adopt such a broad timeframe with a view to enabling thorough exploration of diplomatic endeavours of the authorities in Ankara with respect to a pivotal region encompassed by Turkish foreign policy strategy. Following an introductory section, which also comprises methodological remarks, the main assumptions of theoretical framework are presented. The image theory was developed in the 1990s by Richard K. Herrmann, and was subsequently refined by scholars such as Michele G. Alexander, Natalia

Chaban and Ole Elgström (Wrangle & Bengtsson, 2019, pp. 450–452). It is important to note that image theory has not been extensively utilised in analyses of Turkey's relations with other states. The subsequent section discusses the core tenets of the AKP's foreign policy doctrine (divided into three distinct periods). Implementation of this doctrine in the Western Balkans will be outlined in chronological order. This is followed by a depiction of the concept of public diplomacy, with reference to its version created by the authorities in Ankara. The next section is of particular relevance as it examines activities of Turkish public diplomacy organisations in the region. Four key institutions that provide support to the AKP government in execution of its foreign policy have been selected for this purpose: Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (tur. *Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı Başkanlığı*, TİKA), Yunus Emre Institute (tur. *Yunus Emre Enstitüsü*, YEE), Directorate of Religious Affairs (tur. *Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*, DİB), and Turkish Maarif Foundation (tur. *Türkiye Maarif Vakfı*, TMV). Based on literature review and document analysis, it was determined that these organisations represent the foremost entities (in terms of structures, staff, funds, etc.) that promote Turkish soft power in the Western Balkans, and hence their activities in the region constitute the most pertinent analytical material for this study. The final section of the paper evaluates Turkey's public diplomacy initiatives in the region to date and offers some recommendations for improving Turkish political strategy towards the Western Balkans. When assessing the effectiveness of actions undertaken by aforementioned organisations, particular attention was paid to examining basic indicators of their involvement in the region (e.g. number of field branches established, number of projects completed), as well as social reception of Turkey's public diplomacy institutions and perception of Turkish initiatives. For the purposes of this analysis, it was also vital to consider potential political implications for Turkey resulting from its enhanced presence in the Western Balkans.

The theoretical perspective adopted for this study guided the selection of the primary research methods, which were content analysis and comparative analysis. The research encompassed a range of other methods, including political discourse analysis, factor analysis, process tracing method and foreign policy analysis. This paper is embedded in qualitative methodology and seeks to answer the following research question: what is the effectiveness of image-building initiatives undertaken by Turkey through its public diplomacy organisations? In order to achieve this objective, an exhaustive review of relevant literature (monographs, collective works, academic journal articles) was conducted. In addition, a number of public diplomacy activity reports were examined. The latter can be recognised as primary sources (as well as policy statements used to a much lesser extent). The analysis of contemporary events was facilitated by utilisation of internet materials, predominantly comprising newspaper articles and news agency releases. The triangulation method was used in order to verify their credibility.

Theoretical framework

Image theory in international relations is the concept of analysing foreign policy based on images of a state created by its political elites. Given the interconnected nature of these perceptions, it is possible to make inferences about determinants and directions of a state's international activity. In this context, the key research task is to investigate factors that shape political discourse. A fundamental issue on which image theorists have focused since the late 1950s concerned the essence of elements that construct perception (Rusi, 1988, pp. 30–33). Kenneth E. Boulding was among the first scholars to draw attention to the significant role of image for political science theories. In examining various dimensions regarding interstate relations, he listed several aspects that were particularly important in the image formation process (e.g. enmity and friendliness, strength and weakness). In this perspective, policies enacted by a state are contingent upon perceptions of the decision-makers, who frequently possess an incomplete understanding of the relevant information (Boulding, 1959, pp. 121–129).

Theoretical model of image in international relations was developed by Richard K. Herrmann. His study posits that a state's international image consists of three primary components: political perception, relative strength, and cultural status. As Herrmann elucidated, perceived opportunity or threat evokes specific emotions which, in conjunction with perception of strength and culture, engenders a particular image of a state. In certain circumstances, this may facilitate decision-making in the realm of foreign policy. Therefore, image theory in international relations places emphasis on analysing the internal perceptions of a given state (Herrmann, 2003, pp. 293–303). A noteworthy endeavour to incorporate an additional category into image theory was undertaken by Paul R. Brewer's research team. The scholars aimed to measure the impact of international trust on public opinion. As a result, it was ascertained that this factor also influenced relations between states, thereby affecting their perceptions of each other (Brewer et. al, 2004, pp. 94–106). Subsequent advancements in image theory were furthered by the research conducted by Michele G. Alexander and her colleagues. The researchers' contribution to the expansion of the state of knowledge on international images was to enrich the theoretical model with the category of social identity. It was also determined that perceptions are a product of two distinct factors: structural elements and individual components. Furthermore, the scholars contended that modification at the perceptual level was indeed feasible, thereby underscoring the pivotal role of socio-cultural determinants in the image creation process (Alexander et. al., 2005, pp. 35–44).

While the correlation between internal and external perceptions of the entire image of a state was already identified by Robert Jervis in the 1970s, this area was later subject of in-depth research by Natalia Chaban and Ole Elgström. The scholars discovered a close relationship between external perceptions, legitimacy and political effectiveness. Consequently, it has been proved that these perceptions can serve as a crucial source of information for policy-makers, as specific laws have been developed on their basis (in addition to enhancing social legitimacy of politicians in power). Furthermore, researchers have posited that images affect the overall degree of state activity in the international system, determining its capabilities and limitations in comparison to others (Elgström & Chaban, 2015, pp. 21–30). In an intriguing methodological exposition on image theory, Xiufang Li and Naren Chitty elucidated the critical function of media in transmission of images within the global context. It has been demonstrated that the mass media possess a considerable impact on the general perception of a state through presentation of positive or negative information about them. The researchers emphasised that studies of international images should pay greater attention to analyses of media messages, which consist of several interrelated dimensions (i.e. political, economic, military, cultural, religious) (Li & Chitty, 2009, pp. 3–8).

A seminal piece of recent scholarship on this subject was published in 2020 by Xiuli Wang. In her book, she focused on activities of Chinese public diplomacy, which is a key tool for the authorities in Beijing in creating a positive image of China. The scholar expounded that contemporary international relations are characterised by salience of perception-related issues for states that harbour aspirations of becoming superpowers. As Wang asserts, Chinese public diplomacy is also intended to exert influence on policy decisions in countries that are of particular significance to China. Nevertheless, despite the fact that the authorities in Beijing have modified and updated Chinese foreign policy doctrine over the past two decades, their endeavours to enhance China's international reputation have not yet produced the anticipated outcomes (Wang, 2020, pp. 47–109).

Western Balkans in AKP's foreign policy

Following its electoral success in November 2002, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) adopted the strategic depth doctrine as a foundational principle in forming Turkish foreign policy. The originator of this concept was Ahmet Davutoğlu, one of the closest associates of former Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. From 2009 to 2014, Davutoğlu served as Minister of Foreign Affairs, and then for a further two years as head of government. According to his political vision, Turkey's overarching goal at the dawn of the 21st century was to achieve the status of a regional power in international relations (Özgöker & Ataman, 2013, pp.

70–72). As Davutoğlu contended, active and flexible diplomacy (in both traditional and public forms) should be recognised as the primary tool for promoting the Turkish model of democracy based on Islamic values. Consequently, Turkey was expected to create an image of a state that was responsible for its Muslim-majority neighbouring countries (Tüfekçi, 2017, pp. 152–158). Opposing the entrenched perception of “secular Turkey”, Ahmet Davutoğlu referred to religion and tradition as fundamental factors in the shaping of Turkish national identity. Importantly, the idea of strategic depth was not only applied to the Turkish population, but also to Muslim communities worldwide, particularly those residing in territories that formerly constituted part of the Ottoman Empire (Imai, 2018, pp. 95–101).

After 2002, the AKP government successively implemented theoretical assumptions of strategic depth doctrine. Originating from an Islamist-conservative background, ruling party politicians endorsed views that utilisation of allusions to Turkey’s imperial past could serve to bolster its international standing. In the rhetoric of the AKP leader and then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the strengthening of relations with neighbours could result in Turkey becoming a core state in the post-Cold War geopolitical order (Gunter, 2024, pp. 14–16). Western Balkans were among the first regions where the AKP government sought to implement Ahmet Davutoğlu’s conceptual framework. In the early 2000s, Turkish diplomacy correctly identified local expectations and focused on issues related to ensuring stability and security. In consequence of its dynamic foreign policy at that time, Turkey succeeded in establishing relatively positive contacts with both Muslim (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo) and Christian-majority countries (Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro) (Ağır & Arman, 2016, pp. 151–156). Nevertheless, an overemphasis on the Ottoman past of the Western Balkans, as well as unexpected challenges in other regions (notably the Middle East), have resulted in Turkey’s regional potential not being fully realised. Despite the AKP government’s achievements in improving Turkey’s reputation and fostering economic and socio-cultural relations with the Western Balkans, these accomplishments have yet to translate into tangible political influence (Dursun-Özkanca, 2023, pp. 136–137).

In retrospect, adoption of strategic depth doctrine was instrumental in consolidating Turkey’s regional position. However, Turkish foreign policy-makers have erred in applying a uniform rhetoric to the region, disregarding the internal political contexts of individual countries. Against this background, it is noteworthy that the Western Balkans is arguably the most heterogeneous area among the regions covered by the AKP political strategy (Ekinci, 2015, pp. 382–389). It is important to mention that the presence of the European Union (with every state in the region aspiring to EU membership) and activities of the Russian Federation (especially in Serbia) served as additional impediments to the Turkish plan for political expansion. A significant external power in the Western

Balkans is also China, whose role (particularly in international trade) has been progressively increasing (Teokarević, 2023, pp. 186–188). Therefore, the Turkish model of regional cooperation should ensure establishment of positive relations with as many countries as possible, while being attractive enough to be a viable alternative to EU initiatives and actions of Russia and China. In recent years, a fundamental aspect of Turkish foreign policy in the Western Balkans has been the substantial provision of socio-cultural, religious and educational support for local Muslims. Nevertheless, the AKP government has sought to cultivate an image of Turkey as a reliable partner, demonstrating a commitment to development of the entire region (e.g. through investments by Turkish companies) (Dursun-Özkanca, 2019, pp. 42–59).

Turkish foreign policy under the AKP is usually divided into three distinct stages. Despite the lack of a universally applicable periodisation, the majority of scholars concur that following its electoral victory in 2002, the AKP pursued the course set by preceding administrations in their endeavours to secure Turkey's accession to the European Union. In this initial phase, the Turkish government's primary objective (as articulated by representatives of the ruling party) was to establish a comprehensive integration with the EU institutional framework (Kirişci, 2005, pp. 87–98). In the Western Balkans, this approach was reflected in an attempt to strengthen multi-level regional cooperation ahead of the expected admission to the Community. On the one hand, the authorities in Ankara expressed their readiness to successively implement pro-democratic reforms, thereby bringing the Turkish political system in line with EU standards. On the other hand, they presented Turkey as a state responsible for stabilising its immediate geographical environment. The proposed variety of economic and socio-cultural initiatives for the Western Balkan states were intended to serve this purpose (Yavuz, 2009, pp. 217–228).

As the AKP consolidated its power (and in the face of increasing difficulties in the EU accession negotiations), the then-Prime Minister Erdoğan decided to modify the model of Turkish foreign policy. In 2009, he appointed his advisor Ahmet Davutoğlu as Minister of Foreign Affairs. This step signified commencement of the second phase in the AKP regime (frequently referred to as neo-Ottoman or neo-imperial), which was distinguished by prioritisation of the socio-cultural dimensions of the strategic depth concept (Kamalı, 2018, pp. 39–43). Having secured direct control over Turkish diplomacy, Davutoğlu redirected his efforts towards regaining influence in territories of the former Ottoman Empire, employing a more extensive use of religious references (e.g. calls for renewal of a unified Muslim community in the Western Balkans). Although the notion of neo-Ottomanism was not explicitly invoked by Davutoğlu, several politicians, experts and scholars identified the AKP's strategy at that time with a political trend initiated back in the 1980s by Prime Minister Turgut Özal (Gülbay,

2023, pp. 261–267). One of Ahmet Davutoğlu’s most significant contributions to Turkish foreign policy was his inspiration for the establishment of several new public diplomacy organisations. These entities provided Turkey with additional tools to exert influence over neighbouring regions. Nevertheless, the failure of strategic depth doctrine can be attributed to inability to respond adequately to a dynamically changing geopolitical situation (e.g. the “Arab Spring”). Consequently, Turkey’s regional position underwent a substantial weakening during the mid-2010s (Çandar, 2021, pp. 43–64).

The third phase of Turkish foreign policy in the Western Balkans began in 2016 following the demotion of Ahmet Davutoğlu within the AKP. Henceforth, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who had assumed the presidency two years earlier, became a politician who determined directions of Turkey’s international activity. In the context of a deteriorating internal security situation, the President’s primary focus was on domestic policies, with a strategic decision to limit Turkey’s diplomatic engagement at the regional level. It is evident that Erdoğan’s approach to international politics has undergone a shift towards a more pragmatic stance, in light of recognition that the original form of strategic depth concept was too ambitious to implement (Başkan & Özpek, 2024, pp. 110–118). In regard to the Western Balkans, Turkish foreign policy under President Erdoğan has arguably maintained the majority of its similarities with the preceding period. Admittedly, Turkey has recently placed greater emphasis on economic cooperation, while socio-cultural initiatives have been marginalised. Nevertheless, at the local level, Turkish public diplomacy organisations have persisted in undertaking tasks in domains such as culture, arts and education (Cihangir-Tetik, 2021, pp. 251–258).

Public diplomacy and its Turkish model

The term “public diplomacy” was coined in 1965 by diplomat Edmund A. Gullion, who defined it as a strategy for improving formulation and implementation of a state’s foreign policy by influencing public opinion through non-traditional diplomatic channels, including culture, education, media and sport (Pigman, 2010, pp. 121–122). In this context, public diplomacy fosters creation of a positive perception of a state in the international arena, thereby enabling its authorities to achieve their policy objectives without the need to commit large resources and incur significant costs. In the contemporary geopolitical landscape, public diplomacy has emerged as a pivotal element of states’ foreign policy frameworks (Sevin, 2017, pp. 19–28). From the perspective of citizens, the primary benefit of public diplomacy in comparison with traditional forms is its enhanced accessibility. Whilst professional diplomatic undertakings pertain to a restricted cadre of senior government officials, ramifications of public diplomacy have the capacity to be

experienced by the general populace. Consequently, its reach is also much greater, as is its transparency (Pamment, 2013, pp. 20–31). Furthermore, the advent of novel information and communication technologies has enabled dissemination of political narratives to key audiences with unprecedented rapidity, far surpassing the rate at which such messages were transmitted a few decades ago (Yigit, 2023, pp. 116–118). Nevertheless, it is important to note that public diplomacy should always be subordinated to traditional diplomatic services, thus executing the overall foreign policy strategy of a state (Hocking, 2005, pp. 35–41).

The operating model of public diplomacy is predicated on the concept of soft power. This term was introduced in the late 1980s by Joseph S. Nye, who defined it as the ability of a state to mould preferences and attitudes of others by appealing to its own values and ideals, without the use of coercion or military force. According to Nye, voluntary acceptance of foreign (external) solutions depends on an intertwining of three fundamental elements that make up a state's soft power capacity: cultural status, political values and foreign policy (Nye, 2023, pp. 12–16). In the aftermath of the Cold War, soft power has emerged as a central element in contemporary international relations, holding equal significance to military and economic factors. Against this background, public diplomacy can be recognised as a soft power-based modern trend in foreign policy, whereby a state's socio-cultural resources are employed to formulate political initiatives targeting international public opinion (Davis-Cross, 2013, pp. 5–10). As argued by Joseph Nye, this specific modality of public diplomacy can be regarded as a valuable instrument for strengthening a nation's image, contingent upon the fulfilment of the aforementioned preconditions (Nye, 2008, pp. 94–101).

An important part of public diplomacy is its cultural subcategory, as evidenced by the number of international cultural agreements concluded in recent years. It is acknowledged that culture exerts a unifying influence on political relations, and as a result national governments are cooperating in this field, both bilaterally and multilaterally. Furthermore, given the inherent nature of cultural diplomacy, it can contribute to maintenance of open channels of diplomatic communication, even in the event of a significant deterioration in interstate relations (Higgott, 2020, pp. 22–27). As a sensitive aspect of culture, religion has for centuries been considered one of the most serious conflict-generating triggers in human history. Currently, however, certain public diplomacy organisations are leveraging references to belief systems in order to expand the scope of their activities. A comprehensive understanding of the role of religious conditioning in formation of national identity is hence essential for these institutions to access a more extensive array of resources, thereby strengthening the probability of attaining specific political goals (Marshall & Farr, 2009, pp. 198–204). In this respect, Turkey under the AKP has become a state that has been relatively successful in using religion in its foreign policy. A number of factors (e.g. traditional practices associated with

Muslim heritage, religious worldview of the majority of citizens) contributed to the authorities in Ankara's success in promoting the Turkish model of moderate Islam beyond the country's borders (Öztürk, 2023, pp. 86–92).

As a fundamental objective of public diplomacy is to create a positive image, perception-related issues have the capacity to influence policy actions. Therefore, image management efforts are becoming an integral part of modern political strategies. Hence, gaining control over external perceptions provides an advantage over other actors in the international system. Accordingly, the basic function of public diplomacy, which pertains to active and multi-level influence on foreign public opinion, is also fulfilled (Melissen, 2005, pp. 16–23). It needs to be further clarified that a state's international image consists of two distinct components: internal (images crafted by its political elites and citizens) and external (perceptions of that state held by the global community). It is important to note that a single state may possess multiple distinct perceptions of itself, contingent on its particular domain of engagement (e.g. military, economic, political, or cultural). Nevertheless, its collective image should maintain a high degree of stability (Meng, 2020, pp. 7–15).

In the case of Turkey, endeavours to establish a distinctive national image can be traced back to the 1920s, when Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and his associates initiated a project of profound political transformation with the overarching objective of establishing a modern, secular state. In the aftermath of the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, emergent elites sought to forge alliances with Western Europe and the USA. Consequently, a series of measures were implemented in order to alter the perception of Turks in the West (Tekin, 2021, pp. 61–68). In the face of the collapse of the bipolar system, the authorities in Ankara were compelled to redefine assumptions of Turkish foreign policy and to seek new means of executing diplomatic tasks. The 1990s thus saw establishment of the first typical public diplomacy organisations in the history of Turkey. However, these institutions played a rather secondary political role until the end of the 20th century. Conversely, under the AKP government, Turkish public diplomacy has flourished. Organisations founded during this period have been exploiting Turkey's soft power, which derives from both the country's unique geographical location and its rich cultural heritage (Purtaş, 2013, pp. 7–10). According to İbrahim Kalın, who was responsible for conceptualising and coordinating public diplomacy projects in the AKP government, Turkey, as an aspiring regional power, employs various diplomatic tools to pursue an expansive and active foreign policy (Kalın, 2012, pp. 9–14).

As reflected in views of Ahmet Davutoğlu, the AKP government resolved to utilise a considerably more extensive range of instruments and measures within the domain of foreign policy. The point of reference for units constituting Turkish public diplomacy remained the Ottoman heritage. However, efforts to promote

various initiatives in this regard have multiplied (Anaz & Özşahin, 2015, pp. 501–512). At the turn of 2000s and 2010s, two new institutions (the Yunus Emre Institute and the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities) were established, the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency underwent a thorough reorganisation of its operational profile (including an official name change), and some transnational activities of the Directorate of Religious Affairs (e.g. renovation of mosques) were incorporated into public diplomacy. Day-to-day actions of the latter two organisations received incomparably more funding than in the previous period, and their field staff was also significantly expanded (Göksu, 2023, pp. 854–857). After Ahmet Davutoğlu left the post of Prime Minister in 2016, the party leadership opted for a systematic transition in Turkey’s strategy towards neighbouring regions, replacing diplomatic endeavours aimed at reviving a regional community founded on historical affinities with a more pragmatic approach centred on cultivation of economic relations. Nevertheless, as it has been asserted by some scholars, despite a discernible shift in emphasis, the AKP’s contemporary foreign policy in the Western Balkans has, in essence, sustained continuity with respect to the Davutoğlu period (Öztürk & Akgönül, 2019, pp. 233–236). The government in Ankara has also established another important public diplomacy institution (the Turkish Maarif Foundation) with the remit of educational cooperation. It is acknowledged that AKP politicians had long recognised education as a significant tool of influence, yet prior Turkish initiatives in this domain had lacked adequate coordination, particularly due to the overlap in competencies (Vuksanović & Hercigonja, 2023, pp. 14–16).

Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency

Before the AKP assumed power in Turkey, the sole pertinent organisation of Turkish public diplomacy in the Western Balkans was the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA). Admittedly, representatives of the Directorate of Religious Affairs were also present in the region, yet at the time activities of this institution were not officially integrated into public diplomacy (Donelli, 2019, pp. 11–12). TİKA was established in 1992 as the Turkish Cooperation and Development Administration (tur. *Türk İşbirliği ve Kalkınma İdaresi Başkanlığı*) with the aim of coordinating multi-level development support for Turkic republics in Central Asia and the Caucasus that had declared independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union (i.e. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan). The institution’s task was to facilitate collaborative projects in domains such as industry, agriculture, infrastructure, healthcare, education and tourism (Özkan & Demirtepe, 2012, pp. 647–654). Subsequently, TİKA extended its reach into the Balkans, opening coordination offices in Bosnia

and Herzegovina in 1995 and in Albania in 1996. In the early 2000s, the AKP government successively strengthened existing field branches (both in terms of transferred funds and delegated personnel) as well as sought permission to launch the organisation's activities in other countries in the region. Following the successful conclusion of negotiations, new TİKA offices were established in Kosovo (2004), Macedonia (2005), Montenegro (2007) and Serbia (2009) (Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı, 2018).

Among numerous infrastructural and developmental projects inaugurated in the early 2000s in the Western Balkans, TİKA's programme for preservation of the Ottoman historical and cultural heritage deserves special recognition. By offering complex support to local authorities for reconstruction of a number of monuments, Turkey presented itself, on the one hand, as a state responsible for prosperity of the Western Balkans and, on the other hand, aware of its imperial past (Karagül, 2013, pp. 92–98). According to the researchers, restoration projects initiated in that time contributed to an immediate enhancement in perception of Turks in the region. Balkan Muslims in particular appreciated Turkish efforts as the vast majority of TİKA's reconstruction work included mosques, tombs and other Islamic places of worship (e.g. Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror Mosque in Durrës, tomb of Sultan Murad I in Pristina, Mustafa Pasha Mosque in Skopje). Moreover, a considerable proportion of initiatives started during that period continued in subsequent years (Kardaş & Erdağ, 2012, pp. 173–177). An important socio-cultural initiative implemented by TİKA in the first decade of the 21st century in the Western Balkans was also the Turkology Project (tur. *Türkoloji Projesi*) which offered Turkish language courses for students from the region. Decision to initiate cooperation with local universities was indicative of the AKP's comprehensive approach to foreign policy (Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı, 2005). The Turks understood that increased involvement in the Western Balkans would soon lead to a demand for educated Turkish-speaking staff. In order to maximise the number of beneficiaries, language courses were organised both at the Turkology departments in selected Balkan universities (e.g. Tirana, Sarajevo) and at TİKA offices (Çelik, 2021, pp. 112–113).

An analysis of annual reports indicates that during the second of the aforementioned phases in Turkish foreign policy (2009–2016), TİKA's activity in the region was at its highest. At that time, the agency implemented more than 2,000 different projects in the Western Balkans for a total amount exceeding 350 million euro. According to the data, the Balkan region received nearly 30 percent of Turkey's total foreign development assistance during the period under review. This represented the largest share of spending compared to the other regions where TİKA was present (Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı, 2017b). Tracing the agency's activities in the 2010s, it can be observed that its operational model gradually shifted from providing typical development and humanitarian aid to

a more comprehensive effort to build institutional capacity and stimulate social growth in countries with historical and cultural ties to Turkey (Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı, 2016a). In the Western Balkans, the Ottoman heritage restoration programme had the greatest effect on the public perception. From the early 2010s, TİKA's activities expanded beyond renovation of historic mosques to encompass construction of new ones, thereby signifying the growing role of religion in Turkish public diplomacy (Tabak, 2017, pp. 96–98). Furthermore, the agency's operational profile underwent significant alterations. Previously, TİKA's actions were only prompted by consultations with local community representatives, but later Turks became increasingly proactive in proposing specific initiatives. However, Turkey's excessive involvement contrary to expectations of the Western Balkan societies could have raised doubts about Turkish intentions (Kočan & Arbeiter, 2019, pp. 181–188). Aware of these risks, AKP politicians repeatedly asserted that the primary objective of TİKA's operations in the region was to strengthen Turkey's relations with all Western Balkan states, irrespective of their ethnic or religious composition (Kurtuluş, 2020, pp. 217–218).

Document analysis demonstrates that between 2009 and 2016, TİKA was most active in Bosnia and Herzegovina. As part of the Ottoman heritage restoration programme, Turks renovated several notable mosques, including the Emperor's Mosque in Sarajevo and Ferhadija Mosque in Banja Luka (Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı, 2016b). In the domain of education, the agency successfully completed construction of modern university buildings in Mostar, Tuzla and Bihać. Within the framework of the "Turkology Project", its representatives established cooperation with the university in Zenica (Çelik, 2021, p. 113). In Albania, the primary areas of focus for TİKA have been education (provision of educational materials), healthcare (renovation of hospitals, transfer of medical equipment), infrastructure and protection of cultural heritage (mainly Ottoman-era mosques, e.g. Naziresha Mosque in Elbasan and Iljaz Mirahori Mosque in Korçë) (Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı, 2015a). As asserted by the then-ambassador to Kosovo Kivılcım Kılıç, TİKA had completed around 600 various development projects in the country, totalling nearly 85 million euro. In reference to the alleged neo-imperialist tendencies attributed to the AKP, Kılıç emphasised that only a limited number of Muslim sites in Kosovo had been renovated under the scope of the Ottoman heritage restoration programme (Kosovaport, 2018). In addition, TİKA provided Kosovo with comprehensive development support in the areas of healthcare and agriculture (Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı, 2015b).

In the case of Macedonia, the agency demonstrated primary interest in domains of education (e.g. school construction programme inaugurated in 2013) and restoration of cultural heritage of the Ottoman Empire (e.g. Hüseyin Shah Mosque in Skopje, Chulu Baba Teke Sufi complex in Kičevo). The organisation's motivations for undertaking these actions were articulated as being driven by

aspiration to promote tourism sector (Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı, 2017b). Moreover, TİKA initiated a series of activities aimed at fostering a deeper understanding of the Turkish language in Macedonia (Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı, 2018). In Montenegro, Turkish development assistance was directed towards the northeastern part of the country inhabited by the Muslim minority (e.g. various projects on healthcare and agriculture). Additionally, a number of initiatives were undertaken under the Ottoman heritage restoration programme, including Osmanagić Mosque in Podgorica and Nizam Mosque in Tuzi (Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı, 2012). In accordance with a bilateral agreement that came into effect in 2009, the majority of Turkish aid to Serbia was transferred to the Muslim-majority Sandžak region in the form of educational and medical assistance. Furthermore, TİKA presented a series of projects for the restoration of sites representing Ottoman heritage in Serbia (e.g. Valide Sultan Mosque in Sjenica, tomb of Damat Ali Pasha in Belgrade) (Todorović, 2021, pp. 151–152).

After 2016, Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency continued to be the primary organisation responsible for Turkish public diplomacy in the Western Balkans. According to reports, financial resources allocated by TİKA to the Balkan countries in 2022 alone amounted to more than 160 million Turkish lira (approximately 8 million euro). This considerable budgetary spending was made in the context of Turkey's ongoing severe economic crisis, which had persisted for several years (Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı, 2022a). During this period, the agency's most significant undertakings encompassed domains such as education, agriculture, labour activation, administrative assistance, humanitarian aid, and, following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, countering its repercussions. As a case in point, Turkish involvement in Albania may be cited as an illustration of the provision of comprehensive support to those affected by the earthquake which struck the northwestern part of the country in November 2019. In the immediate aftermath of the disaster, TİKA personnel distributed aid packages to approximately 4,000 individuals. Concurrently, a project was initiated to reconstruct 500 residences for disadvantaged households (Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı, 2019). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, TİKA has contributed to reduction of the unemployment rate by establishing a network of vocational training centres specialising in manufacturing industries (e.g. in Gradačac in 2018). In the healthcare sector, the agency has comprehensively renovated several medical facilities (e.g. provincial hospital in Goražde, haematology clinic at the University of Sarajevo) (Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı, 2020). Cooperation in this field was also observed in Kosovo, where TİKA completed construction of a new intensive care unit at Pristina University Hospital and provided funding for modern equipment for a rehabilitation centre for children with disabilities in Prizren (Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı, 2021). The agency's leading

initiative in North Macedonia was the school construction programme, under which more than 40 educational facilities were constructed. Furthermore, TİKA has been conducting training campaigns on vocational activation in rural areas (Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı, 2020). In Montenegro, the agency's personnel concentrated on providing assistance to local Muslim community, while in Serbia, TİKA's operations encompassed provision of medical care assistance, including transfer of hospital equipment (Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı, 2021). The Ottoman heritage restoration programme in the Western Balkans also continued, with notable examples including: Emperor's Mosque in Foča (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Hüseyin Pasha Mosque in Pljevlja (Montenegro), Ali Pasha Mosque in Ohrid (North Macedonia), and Imperial Mosque in Berat (Albania) (Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı, 2022b).

Yunus Emre Institute

In 2007, the Turkish parliament adopted a resolution to establish the Yunus Emre Foundation, an entity dedicated to promotion of Turkey's culture, arts, literature and language on an international level. As envisaged by legislators, the foundation's activities were also conceived to contribute to creation of a positive image of Turkey through cultural exchange mechanisms (Ünalı, 2019, pp. 146–147). Two years later, the Yunus Emre Institute (YEE) was inaugurated and assumed responsibilities previously entrusted to the foundation. Operating under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, the institute took over the supervision of the “Turkology Project”. Concurrently, the Turkish government initiated negotiations concerning establishment of the first Turkish cultural centres in neighbouring countries (Sevin, 2017, p. 146). In accordance with political directives, YEE's local branches were expected to primarily organise Turkish language learning courses for foreigners, but also to host various cultural and artistic events to popularise Turkey (e.g. music concerts, film screenings, painting exhibitions, literary meetings). These activities served the mission of presenting Turkey in a positive light to the international public, which referred directly to the model of Turkish public diplomacy (Ekşi, 2015, pp. 351–358).

The first two cultural centres of the Yunus Emre Institute were established in 2009 in Sarajevo and in Tirana, thus demonstrating the key role of the Western Balkans in the AKP's political strategy. Moreover, from 2010 to 2015, the institute opened new branches in Skopje, Pristina, Prizren, Fojnica, Peja, Shkodër, Mostar, Podgorica and Belgrade (Sancak, 2022, pp. 61–62). As of the mid-2010s, 15 of the 54 Turkish cultural centres in 43 countries were located on the Balkan Peninsula. In addition to the offices previously mentioned, the Balkan department of YEE also administered branches of the institute in Romania (Constanta and

Bucharest), Moldova (Komrat) and Croatia (Zagreb). Accordingly, centers based in the Western Balkans accounted for more than 20 percent of all foreign units of the Yunus Emre Institute (Yunus Emre Enstitüsü, 2016). The “Turkology Project” was YEE’s seminal initiative in the field of education. Within the scope of this programme, scholarships and grants were awarded, thus serving as a significant incentive for students to start learning Turkish. Among other educational projects implemented by YEE in the Western Balkans, it is noteworthy to mention programmes that were designed to foster socio-cultural cooperation, such as “Reconstruction of Cultural Heritage in the Balkans” or “Revival of Traditional Turkish Crafts in the Balkans” (Ekşi & Erol, 2018, pp. 32–33).

As demonstrated in the data contained within annual reports published by the Yunus Emre Institute, approximately 30 percent of the total number of language course participants originate from the Balkan region. In 2009, when the first Turkish cultural centre was opened in Sarajevo, it had 235 individuals enrolled to learn Turkish. Following the inauguration of language courses at offices in Tirana and Skopje, this number increased almost twofold by the end of 2010 (Yunus Emre Enstitüsü, 2014). In 2016, the institute’s language courses were attended by over 3,000 people from the Western Balkans (almost one-third of all students in YEE). This outcome serves to confirm the relative success of the programme in the region (Yunus Emre Enstitüsü, 2016). In the AKP’s model of public diplomacy, development of linguistic contacts was identified as a key factor in enhancement of socio-cultural ties. Consequently, demand for learning Turkish in the Western Balkan states was met with a high level of enthusiasm by the authorities in Ankara. By promoting cultural projects, Turkey drew on the potential of Turkish soft power on an additional level, thus seeking to influence Western Balkan communities with new tools and methods (Ekşi, 2017, pp. 198–201). Furthermore, a significant segment of the region’s population regarded the prospect of pursuing professional Turkish language education as a vital opportunity to secure employment in institutions and enterprises established by Turks in the Western Balkans during that period. Concurrently, a large number of local students enrolled in YEE courses with the intention of subsequently continuing their education at universities in Turkey (Demirkaya & Çelik, 2021, pp. 145–146).

Opponents of Turkish political expansion in the region pointed out that 8 of 15 field branches of the Yunus Emre Institute in the Balkans were opened in Muslim-majority countries (three each in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, two in Albania). This was interpreted as indicative of the neo-Ottoman orientation of the authorities in Ankara, particularly in light of Ahmet Davutoğlu’s conceptualisation of strategic depth, which distinguished Bosniaks and Albanians as Turkey’s primary regional allies (Öztürk, 2021, pp. 151–154). However, it should be noted that, according to declarations made by representatives of the Yunus Emre Institute, the AKP government planned to gradually expand the scope of Turkish cultural

diplomacy, thus reaching new audiences (Anadolu Ajansı, 2017). An examination of YEE's annual reports reveals that in the post-Davutoğlu period, out of 84 Turkish cultural centres operating in 63 countries worldwide, the branches located in the Western Balkans emerged as the most dynamic entities. Despite the lack of new office openings in the region after 2016, approximately 30 percent of the total number of Yunus Emre Institute projects were executed within the confines overseen by the Balkan department. The 2022 data indicates that approximately 20,000 individuals enrolled in language courses and specialised seminars (e.g. business Turkish, academic Turkish), marking a substantial increase since 2016 (Yunus Emre Enstitüsü, 2022).

Directorate of Religious Affairs

Implementation of the religious dimension of Turkish public diplomacy is the main responsibility of the Directorate of Religious Affairs (DİB; commonly referred to as the Diyanet). Founded in 1924, it initially operated only in Turkey and had a narrow remit (e.g. supervision of Muslim places of worship). Over time, the authorities in Ankara recognised the potential of Diyanet to serve as a political instrument, which provided the rationale for strengthening its position within the state apparatus (Kara, 2000, pp. 43–46). General Directorate of Foreign Affairs (tur. *Dış İlişkiler Genel Müdürlüğü*) was established under DİB in 1971 to coordinate religious support for the Turkish minority in Western Europe. In launching its international activities, Diyanet's primary goal was to promote a moderate interpretation of Islam among labour migrants from Turkey, thereby counteracting propagation of more radical ideologies such as Salafism and Wahhabism (Burgess, 2020, pp. 96–97). In the late 1980s, Turkish politicians initiated talks for creating local representations of the Directorate of Religious Affairs in the Central Asian republics of the USSR, as well as in the Balkans. However, these proposals were rejected (Balçı, 2018, pp. 43–45). Circumstances changed after the emergence of a number of independent states in the former Eastern Bloc, thereby enabling resumption of bilateral contacts concerning the Diyanet's involvement in provision of religious assistance to Muslims (Yurtbilir, 2021, pp. 137–138). Following protracted negotiations, the terms of reference and operational modalities for the institution's personnel in the Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, and Macedonia) and in Central Asia (Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) have been determined. Similar to arrangements made two decades earlier with several Western European states (e.g. Germany, Austria, Switzerland, the Netherlands), Diyanet officers were given the status of foreign religious consultants, which formally sanctioned their activities in both regions. Local political elites decided to conclude agreements with the

Turkish government also due to their willingness to stop the Islamist radicalisation (Bano, 2018, pp. 276–278).

After AKP came to power in Turkey, there has been a systematic growth in the importance of the Directorate of Religious Affairs in both domestic and foreign policy. Following a comprehensive reorganisation of its internal structures in 2010, the institution has been conducting its international activities as an official representative of the state authorities and through its field branches. It can thus be argued that DİB has become an integral part of Turkish public diplomacy (Tabak & Bozkurt, 2022, pp. 117–121). By highlighting the role of the Directorate of Religious Affairs in shaping foreign policy, the authorities in Ankara aimed to align Turkish profile more closely with traditions and values associated with Islamic culture (Yılmaz & Albayrak, 2022, pp. 94–105). According to the 2016 data, there were 106 different types of units responsible for provision of religion-related services (advisory offices, religious attashats, coordination departments) in Turkey's embassies and consulates general in 61 countries around the world. In the case of the Balkans, Diyanet did not have a branch only in Slovenia (Muhasilović, 2018, pp. 70–71). Significant examples of the Directorate's activities in the Western Balkans included deployment of Turkish state-employed imams to serve in local mosques, provision of religious education, allocation of scholarships to Muslim clerics, translation of the Quran and other Islamic texts into Balkan languages. Moreover, from 2007 onwards, the Diyanet initiated meetings with representatives of local Muslim communities to discuss topics such as Islamic extremism, cooperation between Quranic schools and inter-religious dialogue (Özkan, 2015, pp. 147–149). In the area of public diplomacy, the Directorate's contribution to restoration of historic mosques was of crucial importance for Turkey. In this regard, Diyanet collaborated closely with the Ministry of Culture and TİKA (Öztürk, 2021, pp. 154–156). Since DİB lacked the authority to undertake investment of new religious facilities independently, a series of partnership agreements were concluded between Muslim communities in Turkey and in the Balkans. In accordance with the project inaugurated in 2015, the Turkish government committed to securing financial resources for construction of mosques in 66 locations across the region (e.g. Prizren, Ulcinj, Goražde). This number constituted one-third of the total works launched at the time, providing further evidence of Turkish regional engagement (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, 2016).

In general, Turkey's efforts to foster enhanced collaboration within the religious domain were met with a favourable reception in the Western Balkans. Notwithstanding occasional conflicts of interest and administrative discrepancies, the Directorate of Religious Affairs successfully cultivated productive relations with most of the major Islamic communities in the region, thereby reinforcing Turkey's legitimacy as a state capable of proffering its own solutions to religious matters (Alpan & Öztürk, 2022, pp. 54–57). Expectations of many Balkan Muslims,

who anticipated increased Turkish involvement in the region, also worked in the Turks' favour. Consequently, incorporation of Diyanet's international activities within the framework of the AKP political strategy towards the Western Balkans was regarded as a logical outcome. Concurrently, as part of public diplomacy since the 2010s, the Directorate of Religious Affairs gained the capacity to influence new areas (education, culture), thus confirming its prominent position among transnational Muslim organisations (Merdjanova, 2013, pp. 78–81).

Following the gradual shift in the AKP's foreign policy model post-2016, newly appointed chairman of Diyanet, Ali Erbaş, has attempted to refrain from overt interference in the internal affairs of Muslim communities in the Western Balkans. Instead, he has prioritised intensification of personal contacts with local leaders (e.g. Husein Kavazović of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Naim Ternava of Kosovo or Rifat Fejzić of Montenegro) to exert an indirect influence on their decision-making (Öztürk & Baser, 2022, p. 709). According to some scholars, the Turks thus sought to counter repeated allegations that they were exploiting religion for political purposes (Koppa, 2020, pp. 252–255). It is also noteworthy that the detailed provisions of intergovernmental agreements concluded in the 1990s rendered prohibition of Diyanet's field branches a highly complicated legal undertaking. Therefore, the institution's personnel in the Western Balkans were not subject to restrictions on their activities. Nevertheless, their extra-religious actions have been closely monitored by local authorities (Israeli & Dimitrovska, 2021, pp. 275–279). Despite Diyanet's leadership declaring its intentions to construct a network of mosques in the region, the project has confronted significant financial and administrative challenges in recent years. None of the key investments were completed on time and there were serious delays in many cases (e.g. Skopje, Pristina, Bijelo Polje in Montenegro) (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, 2020). Mosques in Tirana and in Olovo (a town near Sarajevo) were eventually opened to the public in the autumn of 2024 (both five years behind schedule). This can be interpreted as a failure on Turkey's part, given that the Turks had previously assured their regional partners that the needs of Balkan Muslims would be met promptly. Nevertheless, AKP politicians still assert that the project of mosque construction in the Western Balkans will continue (İletişim Başkanlığı, 2024).

Turkish Maarif Foundation

The Turkish Maarif Foundation (TMV) is one of the most recent Turkish public diplomacy organisations to operate in the Western Balkans. The institution commenced its activities in 2016, shortly after a proposal to create a special unit under the Ministry of National Education was presented to parliament. According to the legislators' intention, the newly constituted administrative body

was to be entrusted with exclusive authority to establish and manage educational facilities located beyond the national borders, acting on behalf of the authorities in Ankara (Paçaoğlu, 2020, pp. 56–57). Although AKP politicians insisted that the TMV was designed to improve Turkey’s soft power capacity in the domain of education, a significant motivation behind its creation was to assume control of the Gülen Movement’s educational institutions dispersed across several regions of the world. This objective became particularly evident immediately after the failed coup in July 2016, when Turkish diplomacy urged certain states to prohibit Gülenist schools and to transfer their properties to administration of the Turkish Maarif Foundation (Öztürk, 2020, pp. 41–42). As reported by TMV President Birol Akgün, the institution’s staff contacted representatives of more than 70 countries on this matter, with the vast majority responding positively to the Turks’ requests (Çelik & Akgün, 2023, pp. 142–144). Consequently, the Maarif Foundation has expanded its reach significantly in a relatively brief period, emerging as a substantial foreign policy instrument for the AKP. According to ruling party politicians, establishment of TMV has clearly strengthened Turkish public diplomacy apparatus, and provided Turkey with an additional channel to promote its own values (Çelik, 2023, pp. 131–138).

The rapid development of the Turkish Maarif Foundation’s field structures indicated the importance the AKP attached to education. As demonstrated by statistics at the end of 2022, TMV administered 443 facilities in 51 countries around the world, with 51,000 students at various educational levels. In addition to nurseries, kindergartens, schools and universities, the institution oversaw sports centres, dormitories, libraries and laboratories, and published education-related content (handbooks, primers, audiovisual materials) (Türkiye Maarif Vakfı, 2022a). In 2022, TMV possessed 27 branches in the Western Balkans (8 in Kosovo, 5 each in Albania, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, 4 in North Macedonia), which was recognised as a disappointment given the region’s role in AKP foreign policy. Furthermore, in spite of protracted negotiations, the Turks have thus far been unsuccessful in obtaining approval to initiate operations in Montenegro (Ekinci, 2023, pp. 308–309). The first branch of the Turkish Maarif Foundation in the Western Balkans was established in early 2017 in Kosovo. Two primary education centres were located in Pristina and Prizren, while an educational and training complex was constructed in Lipjan (Telegrafi, 2017). In the following year, TMV obtained a controlling interest in the University of New York in Tirana, which subsequently became one of the largest international universities in the entire Balkans (Daily Sabah, 2019). As reported by TMV executives, the foundation had initially intended to procure additional higher education institutions in the region. Although these plans have not yet been realised, it should nevertheless be noted that the Maarif Foundation has managed to enter into close cooperation with several other private universities in the

Western Balkans (e.g. Sarajevo International University, International Balkan University in Skopje, State University of Tetovo) (Anadolu Ajansı, 2021).

Cultural and educational events constituted an important facet of TMV's endeavours in the region. In 2019, the multi-day "Balkan Education Workshop" was held at the Maarif Complex in Tetovo, North Macedonia. As part of the training programme, Turkish educators were tasked with familiarising their Western Balkan counterparts with modern teaching methods (Türkiye Maarif Vakfı, 2021). In 2022, the "International Symposium on Turkish Language Teaching and Turkology in the Balkans" was hosted at the University of New York in Tirana. The main objective of the conference, which was attended by over a hundred academics from Turkey and the countries of the region, was to discuss novel methods of research on the collective heritage of the Western Balkans pertaining to the Ottoman era. As reported by TMV staff, dissemination of Turkish historical and cultural legacy through educational initiatives has been identified as a contributing factor to enhancement of Turkey's positive international image (Türkiye Maarif Vakfı, 2022b).

Nevertheless, the Turkish Maarif Foundation's reliance on political decisions of the authorities in Ankara has given rise to mounting public resistance in the Western Balkans. For instance, endeavours to assume control of Gülen Movement institutions that had a well-established presence in the region (e.g. Mehmet Akif school networks in Albania and Kosovo, Yahya Kemal College in North Macedonia, Burch International University in Sarajevo) were met with protests (Novaković, 2019, pp. 25–27). In Albania, it was also suggested that separate curricula in TMV-run institutions could potentially constitute a violation of the national education system, as according to the prevailing legislation, educational institutions (aside from Quranic schools) should remain secular in principle (Lami, 2019, pp. 14–16). A degree of scepticism regarding the Turkish Maarif Foundation's execution of the AKP's political agenda has also been observed in other Western Balkan countries. Consequently, the institution's growth in the region has been constrained in recent years (Demir, 2024, pp. 51–52). Notable exception to this trend was seen in Serbia, where several TVM complexes, including kindergartens and primary schools, were constructed between 2022 and 2024 in Belgrade, Novi Pazar and Sjenica (Türkiye Maarif Vakfı, 2024).

Conclusion

As outlined in the section on non-traditional forms of diplomatic activity, pursuit of foreign policy objectives in the contemporary international arena requires utilisation of multifaceted approaches. Therefore, it is no longer sufficient to maintain positive relations solely at the political level. Public diplomacy is

recognised as a fundamental instrument for influencing foreign society, thereby ensuring communication between the authorities of one state and citizens of another (Rhee et. al., 2024, pp. 685–690). According to researchers, the Turkish strategy in this regard has arguably taken the most comprehensive form in the Western Balkans, where institutions such as TİKA, the Yunus Emre Institute, the Turkish Maarif Foundation and Diyanet have conducted a plethora of initiatives for social, educational, economic, cultural and religious cooperation (Atcı, 2022, pp. 552–561).

The present study provides substantial evidence to support the claim that public diplomacy organisations have played an essential role in Turkish foreign policy towards the Western Balkans since the early 2000s. As demonstrated above, the authorities in Ankara have been leveraging soft power attributes to a considerable extent, capitalising on historical and socio-cultural ties that bind Turkey to each country of the region. The AKP has employed a well-organised and progressively expanding institutional structure of public diplomacy over the course of two decades to pursue a diverse array of projects and programmes in various domains. These initiatives have been designed to enhance Turkey's political impact in the Western Balkans, a region of paramount importance to the AKP (Çevik, 2019, pp. 56–65). However, when considering the overall perception of Turkish activities in the context of public diplomacy, it is apparent that social reception of Turkey in the Western Balkans varies from country to country, a discrepancy that can be attributed to the radical differences in the historical experiences of each nation. In general, Turks are perceived rather positively in the region's Muslim-majority states, while in those where Christians make up the majority of the population the impression of Turkey is quite ambivalent. Consequently, it is not possible to assert that Turkish political strategy has been wholly effective and successful, nor that the narrative disseminated by the AKP government and its institutions has been particularly appealing to any country in the Western Balkans (Avdić-Küsmüş, 2022, pp. 184–186).

During the period under review, the primary organisation of Turkish public diplomacy in the Western Balkans was TİKA. An analysis of the agency's activity reports indicates that between 2002 and 2022, approximately 4,000 projects were executed in the six countries of the region, with a cumulative expenditure exceeding 800 million euro. The scope of TİKA's involvement encompassed several sectors, including education, agriculture and animal husbandry, healthcare, restoration of historical heritage, infrastructure, and administrative support. With regard to the number of initiatives completed, the Western Balkan states should be ranked as follows: North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (approx. 1,000 projects each), Kosovo (approx. 700 projects), Albania (approx. 600 projects), Montenegro (approx. 400 projects) and Serbia (approx. 300 projects). Another important Turkish public diplomacy organisation in the region was the Yunus

Emre Institute, notable for its cultural activities. According to official figures, approximately 30 percent of the institute's projects were undertaken in the Western Balkans. Furthermore, Turkish language courses have proven to be a source of significant interest for local citizens (Ibishi, 2024, pp. 947–948). Despite its status as one of the most recent public diplomacy organisations in Turkey, the Turkish Maarif Foundation has achieved relative success in the Western Balkans. Within a few years, the Turks had managed to create a network of Turkish educational establishments in the region (also by assuming control of some facilities previously owned by the Gülen Movement). However, actions of TMV have lately begun to attract controversy due to its subordination to the AKP. An outstanding institution of Turkish public diplomacy in the Western Balkans is the Directorate of Religious Affairs, responsible for implementing the religious dimension of the AKP's foreign policy doctrine. In this respect, Diyanet's tasks include provision of theological scholarships, promotion of the Hanafi model of Islam, organisation of gatherings of Muslim communities, dissemination of religious publications and construction of mosques (Sancak, 2022, pp. 60–63).

Critics of Turkish public diplomacy activities in the Western Balkans have directed various complaints against the Turkish government (i.e. propagation of political Islam, perpetuation of hegemonic discourse, infiltration of opposition to the AKP). In this particular context, the most significant allegations have been made against TİKA, Diyanet and the Turkish Maarif Foundation (Couteau, 2023, pp. 20–25). In addition to financial intransparency, TİKA has been accused of aligning itself with the AKP's ideological agenda by renovating Islamic historical sites. Provision of grants and subsidies to several local Muslim associations operating in the Western Balkans was also cited to support these claims (Tonge, 2024, pp. 248–250). The Directorate of Religious Affairs, whose activities are no longer confined only to the religious sphere, has too been the subject of similar complaints for an extended period. It has been observed by some scholars that Diyanet's interferences in the internal affairs of Balkan Muslim communities are not perceived positively, as the Turks often seek to impose their own position instead of offering a compromise solution (Henne & Öztürk, 2022, pp. 8–11). While advisory and mediation initiatives of Diyanet may be deemed permissible, it is highly improbable that any major Muslim community in the Western Balkans would acquiesce to any form of subjugation to Turkey (Kostić, 2016, p. 509). Concerns regarding the Turkish Maarif Foundation primarily relate to its apparent disregard for principles enshrined within educational legislation of the host countries and its alleged intentions to introduce alternative curricula. Despite the lack of concrete evidence to substantiate claims that the institution is being utilised by the AKP government as a vehicle for Islamisation, uncertainties surrounding the TMV's genuine objectives have led to a stagnation in development of its local structures in the Western Balkans (except for Serbia) in recent years (Demir, 2024, pp. 52–54).

It is important to note that Turkish politicians and diplomats have repeatedly dismissed allegations of activities incompatible with the standards of public diplomacy. Nevertheless, the AKP's communication strategy in this regard appears inadequate, and the Turks do not endeavour to dispel emerging suspicions, which consequently adversely affects perception of Turkey in the region. It is recommended that representatives of public diplomacy organisations direct greater attention towards informing the Western Balkan public about less controversial areas of Turkish engagement (e.g. labour activation, technology transfer, infrastructure development, support to the healthcare sector) (Avdić-Küsmüş, 2022, pp. 181–199). It is also of the utmost importance to enhance the level of transparency (e.g. by incorporating comprehensive financial statements within the annual reports). Furthermore, experts have identified some concerning shortcomings of the public diplomacy model created by the AKP. These include, for instance, insufficient coordination of activities, incongruity between the scope of several programmes and the target audience, and subordination of multiple initiatives to the political interests of the ruling party. Against this background, there is a risk that the credibility of Turkish public diplomacy organisations in the Western Balkans will be irreparably compromised, which could have a detrimental effect on Turkey's regional image (Ali, 2022, pp. 261–262).

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The Impact of EU Media Policies on national frameworks in Albania and the Western Balkans

Armela KRASNIQI

DIRECTOR OF ALBANIAN MEDIA AUTHORITY, AMA

Abstract

This policy review examines the influence of European Union (EU) media policies on the national regulatory frameworks of Albania and the broader Western Balkans region, focusing on the role of the Audiovisual Media Authority (AMA) in Albania. It highlights the alignment of Albanian media legislation with key EU directives, including the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD), the Digital Services Act (DSA), the Digital Markets Act (DMA), and the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA). It explores how these EU policies have facilitated the strengthening of AMA's regulatory capacity, ensuring fair competition, media pluralism, and the protection of citizens' rights in the audiovisual sector. The paper also discusses Albania's active participation in EU-level regulatory frameworks, such as the presidency of the Mediterranean Network of Regulatory Authorities (MNRA), the vice-presidency of the European Platform of Regulatory Authorities (EPRA), and its current observer status in the European Regulators Group for Audiovisual Media Services (ERGA). Furthermore, the review examines the impact of EU regulations on the regulation of online platforms, advertising rules, media pluralism and diversity, and the protection of media freedom and journalists. The discussion underscores the challenges and successes in adapting EU media policies to the national context, particularly concerning the regulation of Video Sharing Platforms. The article

concludes that, despite challenges, Albania has made significant strides in aligning its media regulatory framework with EU standards, contributing to its EU integration process.

Keywords: EU Media Policies, Audiovisual Media Authority (AMA), Media Pluralism, Digital Services Act (DSA), European Media Freedom Act (EMFA)

Introduction

The European Union (EU) media policies influence on national frameworks has been significant in shaping the way AMA fulfills its regulatory role for audio and audiovisual media. In recent years, AMA has undertaken a series of legal adjustments in line with EU legislation, including the key Directives transposition, which have also been reflected in our media market.

More specifically and summarized, EU media policies have had an impact on:

1- The EU Standards and Directives Adoption

One of the key areas where EU media policies influence Albania's audiovisual regulatory framework is the alignment with EU directives, such as the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD). Other important acts include the Digital Services Act (DSA), the Digital Markets Act (DMA), and the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA).

2- Strengthening the position of regulatory authorities: AMA is responsible for overseeing the implementation of the audio and audiovisual regulatory framework in Albania, ensuring fair competition, media pluralism, and the protection of citizens rights in the audiovisual sector.

3- Collaboration with European partners: As part of the integration process, Albania has been encouraged to participate in EU-level regulatory frameworks and to cooperate with European bodies. In chronological order, in addition to its ongoing participation, AMA has held the presidency of the Mediterranean Network of Regulatory Authorities (MNRA), vice-presidency of the European Platform of Regulatory Authorities (EPRA), and we're currently observers in the European Regulators Group for Audiovisual Media Services (ERGA).

Online Platforms Regulation: EU regulations, including the Digital Services Act (DSA) and the Digital Markets Act (DMA), influence how Albania regulates video sharing platforms, particularly concerning content moderation, consumer protection and competition.

Video Sharing Platforms: The AVMSD rules do not only apply to what is known as traditional media but also to new media, including social media and Video Sharing Platforms.

Advertisements Rules: EU policies on advertising regulation, such as advertising restrictions for children, rules on alcohol advertising, and gambling advertisements have also been implemented in Albania. The legal amendments in 2023 to Law “On Audiovisual Media in the Republic of Albania”, as amended, focused on the Commercial Communications/ Advertisements definition, the rules and restrictions in their broadcasting on audiovisual platforms and Video Sharing Platforms.

Media Pluralism and Diversity: EU policies promote media pluralism and diversity, emphasizing the importance of a diverse media landscape that ensures a free and independent media. This has assigned specific responsibilities to AMA, which has meanwhile fulfilled its role as a driving force in the audience measurement process and has achieved Albanian audio and audiovisual media ownership transparency.

Media Freedom and Journalists Protection: The EU media policies strongly emphasize media freedom and journalists protection. AMA is part of the inter-institutional group that focuses on protecting journalists while they exercise their profession.

These were the summarized impacts on some of the main pillars where AMA’s work is based. It should be noted that the EU has developed and adopted a series of important Acts and continues to be engaged, always in line with the challenges presented by the media market and, consequently, the regulatory one, in front of changes driven by technological development. Naturally, adapting to these acts and legal regulations, for countries like Albania or the Western Balkan countries that are seeking EU membership, does present challenges, such as those related to the Video Sharing Platforms regulation. However, it should be stated that step by step, the implementation of these acts and directives has been fully successful.

Before I specifically explain the European legal framework effects on the Albanian one, and then on the Western Balkans countries, I must first address the specific legal framework of the European Union for the Media:

1. **Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD)** - Establish standards for audiovisual content, protection of minors, prohibiting hate speech, institutional and television advertisements, editorial independence, as well as protecting and promoting European works.
2. **Media Freedom and the Fight against Disinformation (EMFA/2023)** - It strengthens media independence and provides protection for journalists.

3. **Digital Services Act (DSA) and Digital Markets Act (DMA)** - are two EU laws that regulate **Very Large Online Platforms (VLOPs)**, including social media and Video Sharing Platforms.

DSA focuses on:

- **Fighting illegal content**
- **Protecting user data** and fair advertising;
- **Algorithms transparency obligations** and content moderation.

DMA aims to limit the **big tech monopolies** (Google, Meta, Amazon, Apple) by increasing competition in the digital market.

4. **Action Plan for the European Democracy**
 - Approved in December 2020 and its objective is strengthening electoral integrity, media protection, fighting disinformation.
5. **Code of Practice on Disinformation** has as its objective the collaboration with platforms to limit disinformation, especially during elections and health crises.

These five important aspects of European acts have been aligned and adapted to Albanian legislation, not only as a simple transposition but also as the AMA's regulatory work adoption, in front of the challenges posed by technology in this regard.

Specifically, there are several areas that have been affected by these changes.

- Regarding the national framework, we are referring to Law No. 97/2013 "On Audiovisual Media in the Republic of Albania", as amended.

The changes mentioned above include:

1. **The concept of Video Sharing Platforms**, establishing certain standards regarding the protection of individual rights, reporting obligations, and the advertising content regulation.
2. **The concept of co-regulation and self-regulation** in the codes of conduct development, which define the standards and practices to be respected by Media Service Providers offering audio and audiovisual media content.
3. **Media Literacy** as an important part of knowledge and understanding, enabling the public to use audio and audiovisual content safely and effectively.
4. **Media ownership transparency**, which includes the obligation for audiovisual media service providers to make the information regarding their ownership structure, including beneficial owners public.

These amendments to AMA's organic law have been accompanied by a series of important bylaws:

- **Regulation “On the criteria and procedures for reviewing changes in the ownership structure and the transparency of data related to the ownership of OSHMAs”**, approved In April 2024, with Decision No. 40.
- **Regulation “On the Special Requirements for Video Sharing Platforms Providers”** approved in December 2024 with Decision No. 128, dated 23.12.2024
- **Broadcasting Code for audiovisual media and Video Sharing Platforms**, approved by AMA in July 2023, as amended in November 2024 with Decision No. 107

The Albanian legislation alignment with that of the EU has, naturally faced us with new and unfamiliar challenges. I believe this is true for every country and regulatory subject, regardless of whether they are within or outside the official borders of the European Union, the Mediterranean region, or the Balkans. Below, I will provide a comparative overview of our legal amendments in relation to the respective European framework.

Video Sharing Platforms

The legal basis for the regulation of Video Sharing Platforms is AMA's organic law and the Digital Services Act (DSA). In the amended Law No. 97/2013, Article 32 defines the video sharing service providers obligation to ensure that the content complies with national and international rules, particularly concerning the protection of minors and the avoidance of illegal content.

In conclusion: Both acts emphasize the importance of illegal content and the protection of minors, requiring platforms to implement measures to ensure that the shared content complies with applicable laws and standards.

Protection of Minors and Harmful Content

The Article 32/1 of Law No. 97/2013, as amended, sets out detailed obligations regarding the content moderation that is shared through platforms, with the aim of protecting minors from harmful content, while requiring measures for the filtering and removal of content that may pose a risk to them.

This amendment to Albanian legislation corresponds to Articles 12 and 13 of the Digital Services Act (DSA)

In conclusion: Both acts require measures for the protection of minors, requiring platforms to implement content moderation policies that meet the user safety requirements.

Data Usage and Advertising

Article 32/1, Point 2 states that children's personal data, collected or generated by audiovisual media service providers, shall not be processed for commercial purposes, such as direct marketing, profiling, and behavior-based advertising, or for any other reason. The protection of children's data is also provided to Article 11 of the Regulation, "On the specific requirements that Video Sharing Platform providers must meet to create and offer transparent, effective, and user-friendly systems". Articles 15 and 16 of DSA require platforms to provide transparency regarding how personal data is used, as well as users options to control and revoke consent for the use of their personal data.

In conclusion: Both acts require full transparency regarding the use of personal data and the use of information for advertising purposes, clearly stating that the use of data for targeted advertising, especially for minors, is limited and prohibited.

Reporting and Transparency

In Article 32/2, Point 4 of AMA's Law, it's stated that the Authority defines, through regulations, the specific requirements that Video Sharing Platform providers must meet for the creation and operation of transparent, effective, and user-friendly systems. Meanwhile, Article 15 of DSA requires that sharing platforms publish detailed annual reports on content moderation, explaining their moderation practices and the use of algorithms to manage content.

In conclusion: Both acts require regular reporting and transparency regarding content management and moderation practices, with a particular emphasis on publishing information that enables monitoring and control by authorities and users.

We distinguish: In the Article 16 of the DSA places a particular focus on the "Notice and Action". This process must be clear, swift, and fair for all users. In the Albanian Law has generally implemented a **notice and action** system through the Regulation, "On the specific requirements that Video Sharing Platform providers must meet for the creation and provision of transparent, effective, and user-friendly systems". "*Notice and action*" aims to guarantee that illegal content is removed from platforms promptly and efficiently, while enabling individuals to report violations without facing legal or technological barriers.

In conclusion, we can say that: From a detailed analysis of Law No. 97/2013, as amended, and the Digital Services Act (DSA), we can conclude that both acts provide protective measures for minors, illegal content, and the use of personal data. However, DSA is more detailed and includes advanced technological measures and automated systems for content moderation, while the Albanian Law is more focused on preventive measures and manual content control.

Media ownership transparency

Article 5 of Directive 2018/1808 of the European Parliament and the Council, sets out provisions concerning media ownership transparency. Specifically, the Directive requires that media service providers make accessible to service recipients information related to their ownership structure, including beneficial owners.

Further to the above, and with the aim of full alignment with EU Directive 2018/1808, in the Law “On Audiovisual Media in the Republic of Albania”, as amended, was added point 1/1 to Article 32, which establishes the audiovisual media service providers obligation to make public the information regarding their ownership structure, including the beneficial owners. According to EMFA, provisions are also foreseen regarding the assurance of an even higher level of media ownership structures transparency.

Further to the above, AMA, in April 2024, by Decision has approved the Regulation “*On the criteria and procedures for reviewing changes in the ownership structure and the transparency of data related to the ownership of OSHMAs*”. With the approval of the regulation and the creation of database containing, the ownership structure data of audio and audiovisual media, including final beneficiary, is fulfilled

Media Literacy

Article 2, point 21 of EMFA also provides a definition of Media Literacy. Also, Article 3 on Definitions, specifically Article 6/1 of Law no. 97/2013, as amended, provides the Media Literacy definition, according to which, “Media Literacy refers to the skills, knowledge, and understanding that allows individuals to use in a safe and effective way the contents of audiovisual media services”. This is an ongoing process in AMAs work.

The European Media Freedom Act (EMFA) is a legislative package proposed by the European Commission, aimed at protecting and promoting media freedom and pluralism within the European Union (EU).

EMFA's implementation within the Albanian legal framework is related to:

Audience Measurement

The Audience Measurement definition is stated **by EMFA** and should cover measurement systems developed in accordance with agreed standards by the industries, within self-regulatory frameworks such as Joint Industry Committees, as well as measurement systems developed outside of self-regulatory approaches.

To enable institutional-level Audience Measurement, AMA has undertaken several initiatives, including roundtable discussions with audiovisual media service providers and marketing agencies operating in the country, the promotion of best practices implemented in EU and regional countries, and the facilitation of the process that has so far resulted in the Joint Industry Committee (JIC) establishment, based on this formula: three national television broadcasters, ART, three regional broadcasters, and one marketing/advertising agency.

Regulator Independence

The media regulator independence is explicitly stated in Article 30 of Directive 2018/1808 of the European Parliament and the Council. In regard to this provision, the legal guarantees and safeguards established by Law "On Audiovisual Media in the Republic of Albania", as amended, are consistent with the AVMSD requirements, specifically, **Chapter II of the law** ensures the Authority's full and clear independence.

Institutional Advertising

According to the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA), state advertising should be understood in a broad sense as the inclusion of promotional or self-promotional activities, public announcements, or informational campaigns undertaken by/for or on behalf of a wide range of authorities or public entities, including governments, regulatory authorities, or bodies and entities controlled by governments.

As for the Albanian legislation, I can state that Article 40 of Law No. 97/2013, as amended, provides definitions of the types of advertising and broadcasting.

Editorial Independence

The Article 6 of EMFA states that media service providers must ensure that editorial decisions are made freely within the editorial line, without external influences.

Media Pluralism

Media pluralism is another important point addressed in EMFA, in the Article 21, 22 and in the Definition 64. This is in general terms. Specifically, regarding the EU legal framework in the media field and its integration by the Western Balkan countries, the following points are worth highlighting:

North Macedonia

North Macedonia has aligned its national legislation with the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD) by amending the Broadcasting Law. These amendments focus on ensuring a balanced and fair media landscape, setting limits on political advertising during election periods, and strengthening the independence of regulatory bodies like the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services (AVMS). North Macedonia introduced the Law on Personal Data Protection (2019) in line with the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). This law regulates how media organizations must handle personal data and ensures that citizens' privacy rights are protected when media outlets collect or share personal information.

Serbia

Serbia has aligned its national legislation with the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD) by making amendments on Law on Electronic Media, focusing on ensuring fairness in the media, particularly in areas such as political pluralism, media independence, and the regulation of advertising. The law also addresses issues like the protection of minors and consumer protection in audiovisual services. Serbia's Law on Public Information and Media (2014, amended), is aligned with EU policies including provisions related to the protection of journalistic freedoms and media pluralism. The law aims to create an environment where media can operate independently and free from undue political or economic pressures.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Bosnia and Herzegovina has aligned its national legislation with the EU Directive on Copyright in the Digital Single Market by adopting a Copyright Law (2019) that aligns with this EU Directive. This reform is designed to protect the rights

of creators and adapt copyright rules to digital platforms. The law ensures proper regulation of online platforms that host user-generated content. Bosnia and Herzegovina's Communications Regulatory Agency (CRA) regulates broadcasting activities in line with EU policies. It oversees audiovisual media services, ensuring that broadcast content is in compliance with EU standards related to media pluralism, advertising, and consumer protection.

Kosovo

Kosovo has aligned its national legislation with the EU Directive on Copyright in the Digital Single Market (2019) by implementing its Copyright and Related Rights Law (2018), which includes provisions aligning with EU standards on the protection of intellectual property in digital media, including digital platforms and online content. In compliance with EU Directives that encourage the creation of independent regulatory authorities to monitor media markets, ensure fairness, and regulate broadcasting activities, Kosovo has an independent regulatory authority, the Independent Media Commission (IMC), which oversees media content and ensures that broadcasters comply with regulations set by the Law on Audio-Visual Media Services. The IMC's role includes ensuring that broadcasters adhere to EU-style standards on content diversity, advertising, and neutrality.

Montenegro

Montenegro amended its Law on Media to strengthen press freedom and ensure media pluralism in line with EU recommendations. The country has introduced measures to reduce political influence over the media and ensure transparency in media ownership.

These examples show how Albania and the Western Balkans are aligning their media legislation with EU directives as part of their accession process, with significant reforms in areas such as media regulation, copyright, press freedom, data protection, and broadcasting. These efforts have been reflected not only through the adaptation of the legal framework - such as the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD), DSA, EMFA, including the Digital Markets Act (DMA) - but have also been accompanied by concrete measures, tasks that have been completed and implemented for the further regulation of the audio and audiovisual media market.

The Projects of Europe: Philosophical Origins and Institutional Evolution from the 17th-18th Centuries to Contemporary Integration _____

_____ **Gjergj SINANI** _____

Abstract

European integration remains the paramount objective for the Balkan states, not merely as a political aspiration, but as an affirmation of democracy and the rule of law, foundational principles for any truly integrated community. The central question addressed by this paper, titled “The Projects of Europe: Philosophical Origins and Institutional Evolution from the 17th-18th Centuries to Contemporary Integration”, is: When did these ‘projects’ for Europe first emerge? This study argues that the concept of Europe as an ideal has its origins in the 17th and 18th centuries, especially among French cosmopolitan philosophers, whose ideas played a crucial formative role. It then explores how these philosophical projects were actualized in the postWorld War II era, shaping Europe not simply through economic or political cooperation, but as a moral and political ideal rooted in Enlightenment thought. Although in its early expressions the idea was utopian, revisiting it offers critical insight into the institutions of contemporary Europe. The paper concludes that modern Europe is the cumulative outcome of successive intellectual traditions and practical actions. It contends that misunderstandings persist when Europe is reduced to its material dimensions such as monetary union or free movement and argues instead that its essence lies in civic liberty, solidarity, and responsibility. At its core, peace and security remain the guiding political principles; these are inseparable from the values of freedom, democracy, and the rule of law, which together constitute Europe’s enduring pride.

Keywords: *Projects for the Europe, Rule of law, Democracy, European integration, Ideas, Institutions.*

The Origin of the European Projects

The origin of many projects for Europe must be sought in the cosmopolitanism of European intellectuals. Voltaire, Rousseau, d'Alembert, Montesquieu, and other authors of the *Encyclopédie* are the most distinguished representatives of this cosmopolitanism.

Voltaire's cosmopolitanism was distinctly European, since, for him, the peoples of Europe possessed principles of humanism that were not found in other parts of the world; they were deeply connected among themselves, they had laws that were common, all sovereign houses were allied, their subjects constantly traveled and maintained reciprocal relations. "Christian Europeans," he wrote, "are like the Greeks; they wage wars among themselves, but in these quarrels they preserve such correctness... that often a Frenchman, an Englishman, a German meeting together seem as if they had been born in the same city" (Voltaire, 1990, p. 814). Perhaps Voltaire would not have written these lines had he witnessed the last two world wars.

Rousseau, in *The Government of Poland*, wrote: "Today there are no longer French, Germans, Spaniards, nor English; there are only Europeans. All have the same tastes, the same passions, the same customs, because none has taken a national form through a particular institution" (Rousseau, 1975, p. 347). Yet, while Voltaire, in the beautiful passage we just cited, is pleased with this Europeanization, Rousseau, as always bitter in his remarks, despised it. In *The Government of Poland* he would write again:

"Today there are no longer French, Germans, Spaniards, nor English; there are only Europeans. All have the same tastes, the same passions, the same customs, because none has taken a national form through a particular institution. All, under the same circumstances, will do the same things; all will pretend to be disinterested and will be devils; all will speak of the public good and will think only of themselves; all will praise mediocrity and will wish to be a Croesus; their only ambition will be luxury, their only passion gold: assured that they have in it everything that entices them, they will sell themselves to the first who wishes to buy them. What does it matter to them whose lord they obey, whose state's laws they follow? Provided they find money to steal and women to corrupt, they are everywhere at home" (Rousseau, 1975, p. 347).

Montesquieu too was a cosmopolitan. He refused to propose to his prince something useful for his own country but destructive to another. "I am a human being before being a Frenchman," he declared. A thing useful for the fatherland but destructive for others would be a crime; a thing useful for Europe but prejudicial for humanity would likewise be a crime. Similarly, Diderot spoke of "small heads,

ill-born spirits, indifferent to the fate of humanity and so concentrated on their little societies, their nation, that they see nothing beyond their own interest. These people want to be called good citizens, and I agree, provided they allow me to call them wicked men.”

Thus, for the philosophers of the 18th century, it was entirely natural to speak of mankind first, and then of Europeans. “Our Europe,” wrote Voltaire in the “Essay on Customs”, though belonging to a “fatherland,” to a “nation,” remained troublesome (Voltaire, 1990). Certainly, this subject is complex, for the times in which these things were written were themselves complex. In the dichotomy Us–Them (Europe = liberty; Asia = tyranny), he brings forth the figure of Skanderbeg as the personification of the value of Europe (Liberty) and criticizes “Raison d’État” as the basic concept of international relations, since Europe would otherwise face uninterrupted wars. In this way, he made Skanderbeg part of European consciousness. But how was this European consciousness formed, and why can Skanderbeg be considered a part of it?

In the introduction to his work *Twenty-Eight Centuries of Europe*, Denis de Rougemont (1990) writes:

“1. Europe is much older than the nations. It risks disappearing because of division and of ever more illusory claims to absolute sovereignty... 2. Europe has exercised, since its birth, a function not only universal but, from this fact, universalizing. It has stimulated the world... 3. A united Europe is not merely a modern economic or political device, but an ideal approved for a thousand years by the best spirits” (p. 9).

Thus, Europe is the result of the labor of such great spirits as Montaigne, Voltaire, Montesquieu, Immanuel Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Victor Hugo, and many others.

In this context, what is called “European consciousness” implies the distinction of Europe, as a political and moral entity, from other entities—that is, from other continents or other groups of nations. The concept of Europe was meant to indicate something different from non-Europe, acquiring its characteristics and becoming more precise through confrontation with the non-European—an idea rooted in Greek thought. During the Persian wars and the time of Alexander the Great, the meaning of a Europe opposed to Asia was first formed, in terms of customs and, above all, political organization. Thus was shaped the basic paradigm that would accompany all European discourse: the idea of a Europe representing the spirit of freedom, in contrast to Asiatic despotism.

How does this paradigm appear when Europe confronted the Turks? Before the arrival of the Turks, East and West were not so foreign to one another. “Eastern Rome” had managed, for 1523 years, to resist the assaults of Asiatic peoples thanks to its diplomatic resources. It was the Crusades that weakened the Byzantine state, leaving it unable to resist Turkish attacks. When Mehmed II entered the basilica

of Hagia Sophia on horseback, converting it into a mosque, the entire Christian world was shaken. The Ottoman advance heightened Western anxiety, since they did not stop at Constantinople. They advanced into Hungary, reached the Adriatic, conquered mainland Greece, and clashed fiercely with Venetian possessions. This was the “Turkish terror,” according to a contemporary author.

What were the possible attitudes toward this danger? One was uncompromising war, through union and crusade. Another was compromise—even the use of Turkish force to serve European rivalries. Should they resist at all costs, or withdraw before them? “Poor Europe,” wrote the poet Ronsard in his poem “The Fortunate Isles” in 1553, seeking refuge in those happy islands. Many European and Mediterranean powers sought compromise. Indeed, a portrait of Mehmed II was painted by Gentile Bellini, sent by the Venetian Signoria to the sultan at his request in 1479. Moreover, according to Voltaire, Mehmed II gave the painter “a gift of a golden crown, a golden necklace, three thousand gold ducats, and dismissed him with honors” (Voltaire, 1990, pp. 817-818). From all sides the Italians offered lavish praise to this sultan, and not without reason, since many cities and minor princes, such as Malatesta of Rimini, profited from trade with the Turks. Lorenzo de’ Medici even struck a medal to thank him for delivering one of the authors of the Pazzi conspiracy. On one side of the medal was Mehmed II’s portrait, and on the other he appeared triumphant on a chariot. The engraved legend proclaimed him “Sovereign of a blessed memory.” It must be emphasized that only the humanists clearly perceived the Ottoman threat to Europe—not so much the princes or statesmen. We underline this in order to understand why humanist literature, and later romantic literature, focused on and glorified our hero. And this literature was not limited to the Mediterranean basin, but characterized all Europe, including the northern countries.

In Voltaire’s major work, “Essay on the Customs and the Spirit of Nations, and on the Principal Facts of History from Charlemagne to Louis XIII”, the first volume contains a short chapter entitled “On Skanderbeg.” After explaining Europe’s situation facing two powerful sultans, Murad (whom Voltaire writes as Amurat) and Mehmed II, who “dreamed more of imitating the valor of his father than his philosophy” (Voltaire, 1990, p. 814), Voltaire turns particularly to Skanderbeg. Here are some passages from this chapter:

“Another warrior no less famous, whom I do not know whether to call Ottoman or Christian, checked the progress of Amurat and for a long time was an obstacle to Mehmed II’s victories over the Christians: I mean Skanderbeg, born in Albania, part of Epirus, a land celebrated in the times called heroic and in the truly heroic times of the Romans. His name was Jean Castriot” (Voltaire, 1990, p. 814).

After describing how he ended as a hostage in the sultan’s court and the unknown fate of his brothers, Voltaire says that Amurat “loved him and in war kept him by his side. Jean Castriot distinguished himself to such a degree that

the sultan and the Janissaries gave him the name Scanderbeg, meaning Lord Alexander” (Voltaire, 1990, pp. 814-815). Speaking of Skanderbeg’s engagement against the despot of Serbia, who had risen against the sultan, Voltaire writes: “Skanderbeg, then only twenty years old, conceived the plan to have no master above himself and to reign.” Thus, for Voltaire, this warrior could not accept vassalage, but preferred liberty.

Voltaire accepts the version of the capture of the fortress of Kruja by coercing the sultan’s secretary and then seizing all Albania. Here it is worth noting Voltaire’s judgment of the Albanians: “The Albanians were regarded as the best soldiers of those lands. Skanderbeg led them so well, knew how to draw so many advantages from the rugged and mountainous terrain, that with few troops he always repelled the great Turkish armies” (Voltaire, 1990, pp. 814-815).

Even in the chapter describing the fall of Constantinople and the shock it produced in Europe, Voltaire writes: “In Europe there were only two princes worthy of attacking Mehmed II. One was Hunyadi, prince of Transylvania, who could scarcely defend himself; the other was the famous Skanderbeg, who could rely only on the mountains of Epirus, much as once Don Pelayo did in the Asturias when the Mohammedans subdued Spain.” (Voltaire, 1990, p. 820).

Voltaire also mentions our hero when describing how the knights of Malta halted Mehmed II at Rhodes: “The knights, who are today the knights of Malta, had, like Skanderbeg, the glory of driving off the victorious armies of Mehmed II.” (Voltaire, 1990, p. 827).

From these passages we may draw several conclusions:

First, Voltaire saw Skanderbeg as the embodiment of liberty in the face of tyranny. Instead of accepting a despotic order in which pashas were sultans where they governed, but with their heads always at risk on the sultan’s platter, Skanderbeg chose freedom. Let us not forget that the paradigm of Europe as the land of liberty is essential in Voltaire’s thought, even when he criticizes Europe’s vices.

Second, Voltaire emphasizes not so much “Christianitas” as Europe itself. If many European princes chose compromise with Turkish despotism, Skanderbeg represented the statesman who did not rely so much on “raison d’état” in political relations, but on higher spiritual values. Thus, more than Christianity, Skanderbeg saved Europe.

Third, in order to revive the spirit of liberty threatened by Eastern despotism, Voltaire deliberately appeals to European consciousness through the figure of Skanderbeg—not merely through his heroic deeds, but through his moral virtues. The idea of peace, being central in philosophical thought, led to projects that reveal a connection between European cosmopolitanism and certain forms of utopia. Many of them have European resonances. Let us consider some of these projects.

In 1693, William Penn wrote “An Essay towards the Present and Future Peace

of Europe". He was concerned about peace in Europe and believed that the means to peace was justice, not war. He held that peace in Europe could be secured and preserved. For this reason, he presented his project for the present and future peace of Europe. In Section IV, "For a General Peace, or the Peace of Europe and its Means," he wrote: "Now, if the Sovereign Princes of Europe, who represent that society, or the independent condition of men that was before the obligations of society, for the same Reason would engage the People first into Society, that is, the Love of Peace and Order, then agree to meet by their Deputies, to constitute in a General Diet, Estates, or Parliament, and there establish Rules of Justice for Sovereign Princes to observe one towards another; and thus meet yearly, or once in two or three years at least, or as they shall see cause, and be stated in the Imperial Diet, Parliament, or Estates of Europe; before which Sovereign Assembly shall be brought all differences depending between one Sovereign and another, that cannot be made up by private Embassies, before the Sessions begin; and that if any of the Sovereigns that constitute these Imperial States shall refuse to submit their Pretensions to them, or to abide and perform the Judgment thereof, and seek their Remedy by Arms, or delay the Execution of their Resolutions, beyond the Time prefixed in their Determinations, all the other Sovereigns, united as one common Force, shall compel the Submission of the Parties that shall so refuse. By which means, Europe will quietly obtain the desirable and necessary Peace, for its harassed Inhabitants; there being a Sovereignty in Europe, and a Power, that no one can show a Will to resist; and consequently, Peace must be secure and durable in Europe." (Penn, 1693, p. 406).

He was even more concrete when he proposed the composition of this "imperial state": "I suppose that the Empire of Germany shall send Twelve; France, Ten; Spain, Ten; Italy, which falls to France, Eight; England, Six; Portugal, Three; Sweden, Four; Denmark, Three; Poland, Four; Venice, Three; the Seven Provinces, Four; the Thirteen Cantons, and the neighboring petty Sovereigns, Two; the Duchy of Holstein and Courland, One (today Western Latvia); and if the Turks and the Muscovites are admitted, as seems but right, they shall have Ten. In all Ninety. A great Presence, when they represent the Fourth, and now the best and richest part of the known World; where Religion and Learning, Civility and Arts have their Seat and Empire." (Penn, 1693, p. 409).

The project implied avoidance of corruption, since if any of the deputies of this high and powerful form were so vile, false, and dishonest as to be influenced by money, "they have the Advantage of taking their Money, which they shall give, and voting against their Principal;" thus making use of their inclinations for the greater good. Finally, regarding the language "in which the sessions of the sovereign states should be held, to be secure it must be in Latin or French; the former would be very suitable for civilians, but the latter easier for men of quality." (Penn, 1693, p. 410).

Taking into account the above ideas, we also find in this project several practical suggestions regarding how the Assembly should conduct its work and reach decisions. He proposed a rotating presidency with a modern echo, such as secret voting (to prevent or reduce corruption), record-keeping (with safeguards to prevent falsification), and the use of Latin or French as the official language. At that time, English was certainly not the global language it would become in the 20th century. Nevertheless, the fact that Penn did not mention his own native tongue, and that he allocated six votes to England in the Assembly (half that of Germany, and fewer than the ten given to France or the eight to Italy), demonstrates his fairness and objectivity. As an honest Quaker, he could not be accused of having drafted a scheme intended primarily to advance the interests of his own country (a suspicion or accusation that has rightly been raised in regard to certain other schemes for perpetual peace). Decisions were to require three-quarters of the total votes, in order to reduce the likelihood of corruption. Except in cases of conflict, princes would retain full sovereignty. Moreover, disarmament could be undertaken to enable the development of agriculture, commerce, science, and education. The reputation of Christianity would be preserved, thus allowing for unity against the Turkish threat (Tavares da Silva, 2009).

One might think that he was merely a dreamer without political experience. Yet more than ten years before writing his Essay, William Penn founded the colony of Pennsylvania (named after his father, at the insistence of King Charles II) so that his fellow believers, as well as other persecuted sects, could emigrate and practice their faith without fear of persecution, living in a tolerant society governed by law and creating a community with advanced liberties. In 1682 he drafted his “Frame of Government” for the colony, limiting governmental power and guaranteeing many fundamental freedoms of Penn’s “Holy Experiment,” which survived for the next seventy years (1680–1750). One of its key features, which made it famous at the time and later, was the harmonious relations between settlers and the native Indians. Fully consistent with the Quaker view of the equality of all human beings, they were treated with dignity and honesty—something to which they were unaccustomed, and for which they praised Penn and his fellow Quakers. As governor of the colony, Penn not only drafted its constitution but also designed the city of Philadelphia—the “City of Brotherly Love”—ensuring that houses had gardens and that the city preserved green spaces, while also protecting the natural environment from ruthless exploitation. Penn also outlined a constitution for the union of the thirteen colonies that would later inspire the American Constitution. He was a man of vision, but also of practical wisdom. (Tavares da Silva, 2009).

Thus, Penn is also an important figure in the history of both England and the United States; indeed, together with Benjamin Franklin, a century later, he is considered a founding father of the American Republic. Penn and Franklin, from

their residence in Philadelphia, made America great. This is another reason to remember William Penn today.

Another disciple of Penn, John Bellers, proposed to the British Parliament a project entitled “*Some Reasons for an European State, 1710, Proposed to the Powers of Europe by an Universal Guarantee and an Annual Congress, Senate, Diet or Parliament, To Settle Any Disputes about the Bounds and Rights of the Princes...*” Unlike Penn, he believed that this system should primarily be directed against France, which at the time was almost continuously at war with the whole of Europe. Once peace was achieved, France could then be admitted. The “status quo” that would be established by the treaty could no longer be altered, and all members would solemnly renounce their claims. Europe would be divided into five provinces, each of which would provide the League with either 1,000 soldiers, or ships, or funds. The states would remain in existence. He envisioned as many representatives in the Diet as there were provinces. The procedure for compulsory arbitration would be the same as Penn’s.

In conclusion, he wrote: “The Muscovites are Christians, and even Mohammedans have the same capacities and reason as other men... But to leave their minds aside, to exclude them from meaning, would be a great mistake and would leave Europe in a state of civil war; whereas the more this civil union can be expanded, the greater will be peace on earth and goodwill among men” (Bellers, 1710, as cited in Tavares da Silva, 2009, p. 20).

These projects did not have any great resonance. This was not the case, however, with the three large volumes published by the secretary of Cardinal Polignac, one of the French representatives at the Peace Conference of Utrecht. This was the abbé Charles-Irénée Castel de Saint-Pierre, between 1713 and 1717. Already in 1712, at Cologne, he had written a short work entitled “*Mémoires pour rendre la paix perpétuelle en Europe*”. The second volume was entitled “*Projet pour rendre la paix perpétuelle en Europe*”, and the third: “*Projet pour rendre la paix perpétuelle entre souverains chrétiens*” (Saint-Pierre, 1713/2019). One notices the dilemma between the idea of Europe and that of Christianity.

Abbé Saint-Pierre believed that a Confederation should be created solely for Europe (Saint-Pierre, 1713/2019). Only such a confederation could secure a peace that the balance of power between France and Austria had failed to maintain. Sovereigns would form a “European Association” and would send permanent representatives to a permanent Congress or Senate. The Association would prohibit any use of violence. If any sovereign were to commit aggression, the Association would dispatch an investigative commission as well as troops. Sovereigns pledged to maintain the *status quo* and could not proceed with territorial exchanges or sign treaties without the approval of Congress by a three-quarters majority. To prevent any power from becoming too dominant, no sovereign, except the Emperor, could rule over more than one state. Problems relating to commerce

would be regulated by “Chambers for the Preservation of Commerce,” created in different cities. The abbé envisaged an association composed of 24 European members, but it could be formed as soon as 14 princes agreed to adhere. From that moment on, any prince who refused to join would be considered an “enemy of Europe.” The members would wage war against him, and if he persisted, he would be expelled from his state. Any war, aside from these collective military sanctions, would be prohibited and would expose its author to the aforementioned penalties.

Unlike Penn’s project, which based the number of delegates on the wealth of states, the abbé proposed that each of the 24 members should have only one delegate. By contrast, financial contributions would be proportional to the revenues of the states. All of this, comprising the “fundamental articles,” could only be amended unanimously. Other provisions, designated as “important articles” and “useful articles,” required a three-quarters majority.

The “important articles” proposed that the seat of the Congress should be Utrecht, that the Association should have an ambassador in every member state and a “resident” in each major province. The Association was also tasked with studying colonial rivalries so that they would not become causes of war. At the end of the project, he wrote: “If this project is proposed to sovereigns during war, it will facilitate peace. If it is proposed during peace conferences, it will ease their conclusion. If it is proposed after peace has been achieved, it will contribute to its duration” (Saint-Pierre, 1713/2019, p. 589).

That this plan was utopian is evident from a letter sent to the author in 1715 by the German philosopher Leibniz. The expression “perpetual peace” seemed to him unrealistic. Moreover, how could it be imagined that princes would consent to abandon an essential part of their sovereignty and all their ambitions simply by reading a book? This well-intentioned illusion may be compared with what Frederick II wrote in his testament of 1768: “There is no great prince who is not possessed by the idea of expanding his own power.” Nevertheless, if the abbé’s influence was at the time of a purely intellectual nature, in the future he inspired many statesmen such as Necker, Napoleon, Metternich, and later, the men of the League of Nations, who revived some of these ideas, such as compulsory sanctions, controlled disarmament, an association of sovereign states (and not of peoples), etc. His concern with commerce, which was to be regulated by the Senate, may perhaps have influenced the creation of the “Economic and Social Council of the United Nations.” Likewise, he opposed secret treaties, since the Association was to approve, not merely register all treaties signed by members. Two centuries later, it would be Wilson who would demand the non-recognition of secret treaties in the regulation of international peace.

Rousseau took great interest in this project. His plan closely resembled that of the abbé. On the one hand, in 1761 he published a short text entitled “Extrait du projet de paix perpétuelle de M. l’abbé de Saint-Pierre. “On the other hand, he

appended to the work his "Jugement sur la paix perpétuelle," which was published in 1782, four years after his death. Rousseau's plan resembled that of the abbé in the sense that the philosopher of Geneva, like his predecessor, believed that since war was a matter of princes, only through a federation of princes could it be avoided. He adopted the same technique of a permanent structure, with 19 members instead of the abbé's 24, including Russia and the Pope. Like the abbé, he relied on the idea of the effectiveness of military sanctions.

The difference between them lies in their style of writing. Unlike the abbot's work, which was voluminous and heavy, Rousseau's writings were distinguished by sharp logic, clarity, and precision. Yet, in Rousseau, another strength was evident. While the abbot based his project on the goodwill of princes to pursue the well-being of their subjects, Rousseau—who harbored no sympathy for princes—believed they would adhere to such a plan only insofar as it coincided with their own interests. Essential to his reasoning was the conviction that everything would proceed favorably only if princes were replaced by states founded upon the principle of the national will.

Between 1786 and 1789, Jeremy Bentham wrote an essay, published posthumously in 1843, entitled *A Plan for Universal and Perpetual Peace*. (Bentham, 1927). The term "universal" implied that any instigator of war would be deemed unworthy by Europe. Central to his essay was the foresight of a "world tribunal," whose decisions would be published by a free press and thereby secure the support of public opinion. The utopia here did not consist in constructing a cumbersome apparatus to restrict the sovereignty of rulers, but rather in the belief that public opinion itself would have the force to ensure compliance with the tribunal's decisions and to impose disarmament. Since Bentham further stipulated, as a precondition, that nations renounce their colonies, the project had very little chance of acceptance.

The most significant plan of that century was Emmanuel Kant's, published in 1795 in Königsberg under the title *Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View*. Kant was inspired by the Treaty of Basel in 1795, just as Saint-Pierre had been by the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713. This project, too, belongs among the utopian schemes of the eighteenth century. Like his predecessors, he proposed the creation of a general confederation of European states. Moreover, like them, he opposed secret treaties, permanent armies, and the use of force for national advantage. Influenced by the rising tide of nationalism, he added the principle that no independent state could be subordinated to another. It is worth recalling, in this regard, that the third partition of Poland occurred in 1795.

Kant's system rested on a novel idea: that to secure perpetual peace, state regimes had to be republican. In a republic, the consent of citizens was indispensable to wage war. Kant distinguished between the republic, where executive power is separated from the legislative, and "democracy," where this

separation does not exist and which, in his view, corresponded to “despotism.” In making this distinction, he had in mind the French revolutionary experience of Jacobin terror.

Although far more ambiguous than previous schemes regarding the mechanism of confederation, Kant’s project was less utopian. The conditions he set for the realization of such a confederation revealed that it was not yet ripe to be born. Let us pause more closely on Kant’s idea, which would later inspire President Wilson after the First World War in his conception of the League of Nations.

In his seventh proposition, Kant affirms: *“The problem of establishing a perfect civil constitution is inseparably linked with the problem of establishing regulated external relations among states, and cannot be solved independently of the latter”* (Kant, 1990, p. 79). According to Kant, just as individuals are compelled to unite yet retain individual freedom, so too does each community, in its external relations that is, in its dealings with other states, enjoy an unrestrained liberty. Thus, every state must expect to suffer at the hands of others the same evils that weigh upon individuals, compelling them to enter into a civil state governed by law. Once again, Kant tells us, nature has employed the discord among men and the antagonisms among great societies and political bodies as a means to generate, within their unavoidable conflicts, a condition of tranquility and security. Hence, through wars and the miseries they bring upon states—even in times of peace—nature, in its endeavors, at first imperfect, then through many devastations, collapses, and the radical exhaustion of their internal resources, drives states to accomplish what reason would have taught them to do without such painful trials: *namely, to emerge from the archaic state of savagery and to enter into a League of Nations*. “There, each state—even the smallest—would secure the guarantee of its rights and its security, not merely through its own power or its own estimation of its rights, but solely through this League of Nations, through a united force and a judgment rendered according to laws grounded in the concord of wills (Kant, 1990, p. 79). This, he argued, is the only way to prevent men from plunging one another into misery, and to compel states to accept the solution of renouncing their brutal freedom in order to seek peace and security under a lawful order. *“Thus, one day, partly through the establishment of a civil constitution as adequate as possible within, and partly through a common convention and legislation without, a condition of affairs will be instituted which, as a universal civil society, may be regarded as a kind of moral automaton”* (Kant, 1990, p. 80).

In short, to escape the wars to which the “barbarous liberty of states” leads, a rational organism must be created, grounded in the principle of equality in action and reciprocal reaction, so that states do not destroy one another. *“Though this political organism is, for the moment, still only a very general sketch, a sensibility is already apparent among all its members; what matters most is the preservation of*

collectivity. What gives hope is that, after many revolutions and transformations, the highest end of nature will ultimately be achieved: the establishment of a universal cosmopolitan state, the hearth where all the initial dispositions of the human species may develop”(Kant, 1990, p. 79).

Europe after the Second World War

These ideas resurfaced after the Second World War, when the process of remodelling Europe began. For this reconstruction to succeed, ideas had to be incorporated into human communities. Great creations emerge from great ideas. The transmission of these ideas is indispensable to understanding what transpired in Europe after 1945. Here, we must bear in mind three elements: the role of circumstances, the existence of creators, and the supporting tendencies within human communities.

The circumstances of 1945 are well known. Europe was not only devastated by war, but also gravely wounded morally. At the same time, the advance of the Red Army led to the division of the continent into two sectors separated by an “iron curtain.” For the West, this represented a threat—at least for the majority—since communists and sympathizers existed who desired, if not the advance of the Red Army, then at least revolutions that would establish regimes analogous to that of the USSR. For a long time, the situation remained uncertain, particularly in France, Italy, and Greece, due to the prestige and heroism of communists in these countries.

To most Western populations, the threat corresponded to the danger of establishing Stalinist-type regimes, where individual liberty was sacrificed for the triumph of the proletariat, according to norms dictated by its vanguard, the Communist Party.

Out of the ruins and the menace emerged, indirectly, another circumstance: the advent of an entirely new American policy. The United States abandoned its traditional isolationism, entered the great war, and emerged as one of the two “superpowers.” The dilemma arose: would it return to its earlier stance, retreating once more into the “American fortress”? Yet, after Yalta, the alliance with the other “superpower” broke down, leading toward the Cold War. What was to be done? Should concessions be made to the USSR in order to preserve the alliance, or should it be countered and restrained? The appointment of General Marshall to the State Department in 1947 marked the victory of the latter tendency.

It is well known that after war, the natural inclination is to return to normalcy—to bread, peace, and liberty. To this aim, the Marshall Plan was devised. Another circumstance was the decline of nationalist fervor. France, in its 1946 Constitution, even introduced the principle of renouncing parts of national sovereignty in favor

of reciprocity. Thus, chauvinistic nationalism was broken in Europe. This was also evident in European intellectual movements: suffice it to mention the creation of various associations such as the “European Union of Federalists.”

This movement developed among conservatives (Churchill), Christian democrats (the New International Teams), and socialists (the Socialist Movement for the United States of Europe). It also took political and economic forms, such as the European League for Economic Cooperation. In 1947, Count Coudenhove-Kalergi initiated parliamentary advocacy for a “European Parliamentary Union.” In the intellectual realm, as early as 1947, the “International Committee for Cooperation of Movements for a European University” was established. In 1948, a spectacular congress was convened at The Hague, attended by numerous ministers in office. From this arose the idea of uniting all groups in a “European Movement,” formally founded in October 1948, with Churchill, Léon Blum, Paul-Henri Spaak, and Alcide de Gasperi as presidents. European institutes were established in Bruges, Turin, Saarbrücken, Nancy, and many other centers. The idea and the circumstances awaited the right individuals.

The initiative was taken in July 1948 by Georges Bidault. Impressed by the Hague Congress, he proposed the convocation of an elected European assembly. This project was taken up with vigor by Robert Schuman, his successor as foreign minister. The proposal was well received by Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg, which accepted the idea of an assembly endowed with certain supranational powers. Britain, under a Labour government that prioritized the Commonwealth, presented a counter-project rejecting supranationality and proposing instead a Committee of Ministers. By the end of the negotiations in 1949, the “Council of Europe” appeared as a compromise between the French and British positions, since it consisted of a Consultative Assembly and a Committee of Ministers. In reality, however, the British thesis prevailed, for supranational power was not accepted. The difference from the prewar stance was that Britain now acknowledged the existence of a specifically European body, while still applying in practice the policy of a return to normalcy.

Thanks to this British stance, the Council of Europe played only a limited role, serving primarily as a meeting ground and forum for cooperation. This did not satisfy the advocates of European unity. A new constellation of circumstances demanded a reconsideration of the issue. Chief among these was the reemergence of Germany as a subject—no longer merely an object—of diplomacy, with the creation of the Federal Republic of Germany in 1949. As long as a German state existed, so too would claims persist regarding divided German territories. The most significant was the Soviet zone and territories annexed to Poland; yet more immediate was the Saar, politically detached by France and joined to its own economic zone. Robert Schuman sought Franco-German reconciliation. How could the Saar problem be resolved without creating conflict between France and Germany? Could this be linked to the problem of European unification?

The solution was found by Jean Monnet, in the idea of integration. Long before, Schuman had proposed, in 1950, the plan that bears his name, marking a decisive step forward. The Schuman Plan envisaged the creation of a “European Coal and Steel Community,” founded upon a common market, shared objectives, and joint institutions. Let us recall two phrases from the preamble of the treaty: *“Considering that world peace can be safeguarded only by creative efforts commensurate with the dangers that threaten it,”* and, further: *“Considering that Europe can only be built through concrete achievements which first create a de facto solidarity, and through the establishment of common bases for economic development.”*

What was revolutionary in the idea of integration was the synthesis of two simple concepts: supranationality and concrete economic realities. This synthesis indicated that Europe could be united only if the economies of its members were first integrated, thereby creating a real unity before proclaiming a legal one. This idea also provoked an irresistible tendency toward political unity.

Jean Monnet had understood the importance of this synthesis through his own political experience. He had directed the Franco-British supply mission in 1939–1940, and was among the initiators of the Franco-British union project of June 1940. In 1941, in the United States, he put into effect the “Victory Program” for military production. In 1943, he contributed to reconciling the two Frances—that of de Gaulle and that of Giraud. He became High Commissioner of the French Planning Office of the Fourth Republic. Planning, reconciliation, synthesis—that is, the combination of clarity of vision with imagination—were the hallmarks of his personality. Many authors argue that without Jean Monnet, today’s Europe could scarcely be conceived. Indeed, no one was better intellectually prepared or more practically tested to make the seemingly simple, yet profoundly fruitful, discovery of integration.

The creation of the Coal and Steel Community opened a new perspective. Integration was also attempted in military affairs (the European Defence Community), though unsuccessfully; but with success in the peaceful use of nuclear energy (Euratom) and the European Common Market.

Thus, the Council of Europe and the European Union were born from the same idea, the same spirit, and the same ambition. At their foundation lie the cosmopolitan projects and the circumstances created after the Second World War. All converge on the point so eloquently formulated by Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi: *“A divided Europe leads to war, oppression, and misery; a united Europe to peace and prosperity.”* The European project advanced by gaining the trust of its citizens. Democracy and the rule of law constitute the continent’s pride. The spread of democratic principles, human rights, and the supremacy of law remains an unfinished task, for Europe’s thinkers have always emphasized the need to beware of illusions—that democracy, once established, is unshakable. Democracy must not degenerate into an empty ritual. The tendency of political classes and

state structures to distance themselves from citizens constitutes a permanent danger to democracy. Democracy is like a living organism: once established on solid foundations, it requires constant adaptation in order to respond effectively to the demands of its citizens.

If, at the outset of our reflection, we began with the projects elaborated in the eighteenth century, and then leapt forward to the aftermath of the Second World War, we have passed over many important periods in the elaboration of the idea of Europe. Our purpose has been to show that contemporary Europe is the product of a long endeavor of thought and concrete political action. Above all, simplistic misconceptions about Europe must be avoided. It is neither a drawer of funds nor merely a zone of free circulation of goods and persons. Europe is, first and foremost, a space of civic freedom, solidarity, and responsibility.

At the foundation of both thought and practical action for Europe lies, as we have seen, the idea of peace and security. From this derive the principles of liberty, democracy, and the rule of law, ideas that constitute the pride of Europe.

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