

"Attempts to influence": Survey of perceptions of Albanian journalists

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The following text examines the freedom of the press in Albania from the subjective perspective of journalists. It does not discuss individual cases, or provide statistics on violence against journalists, but it does reveal how journalists felt affected by different political actors and events during the turbulent phases from 1991 to 1998 by means of a statistically representative opinion poll.

The survey took place in June 1998, covering all editorial offices of daily newspapers, the news production office of State TV and State radio, and some offices of smaller media in Tirana. A total of 136 journalists participated. About a half of all journalistic employees were present and interviewed, so the database can be regarded as valid for Albanian daily journalism in 1998 as a whole. The survey does not record objective offences against the freedom of the press, but rather the subjective feelings of journalists, which were recalled in retrospect. Polling was done using a standardised questionnaire filled out by the journalists themselves. [\[1\]](#)

Results: External freedom of the press

The level of threat to the journalists personally, and the impact on their activity during the recent political periods was registered by one section of the questionnaire. [\[2\]](#) For each political phase, respondents could note that a political force had tried to influence their reporting, and that they had been physically threatened. The questionnaire collected this data in retrospect, because only journalists who were still active at the moment of the poll took part in the survey. Those who had lost their jobs due to those conflicts do not appear in the survey at all.

Staff turnover proved to be very high. In every of the recent periods, one-third of the respondents had changed employers. Only in the period from 1991 to 1992 were staff turnover rates low, when the independent media just had been consolidated and apparently retained their recently built-up staff. At the time of the survey, just one third of respondents still worked for the same employer as at the beginning of their careers.

From these findings, it follows that journalists who had successfully avoided conflicts will be over-represented in earlier periods. For the first period covered by the survey, we received the lowest number of reported incidents, and for the last the most. A less distorted result can be reached by comparing the number of journalists reporting harassment or threats with the total number of journalists active at that moment (as in the diagrams below).

Recalled "attempts to influence"

Journalists active in 1998 who reported that somebody had tried to influence their reporting

	Before 1990	1991-92	1992-94	1994-96	1996-97	1997-98	total
Attempt(s) noticed	11	11	16	21	34	45	138
(in %; see graph)	27,5%	18,0%	18,6%	19,3%	26,6%	33,3%	24,6%
No such attempt noticed	29	50	70	88	94	90	421
n (all, that worked in this year and in 1998)	40	61	86	109	128	135	559

Recalled "attempts to influence" by public authority

Attempt noticed

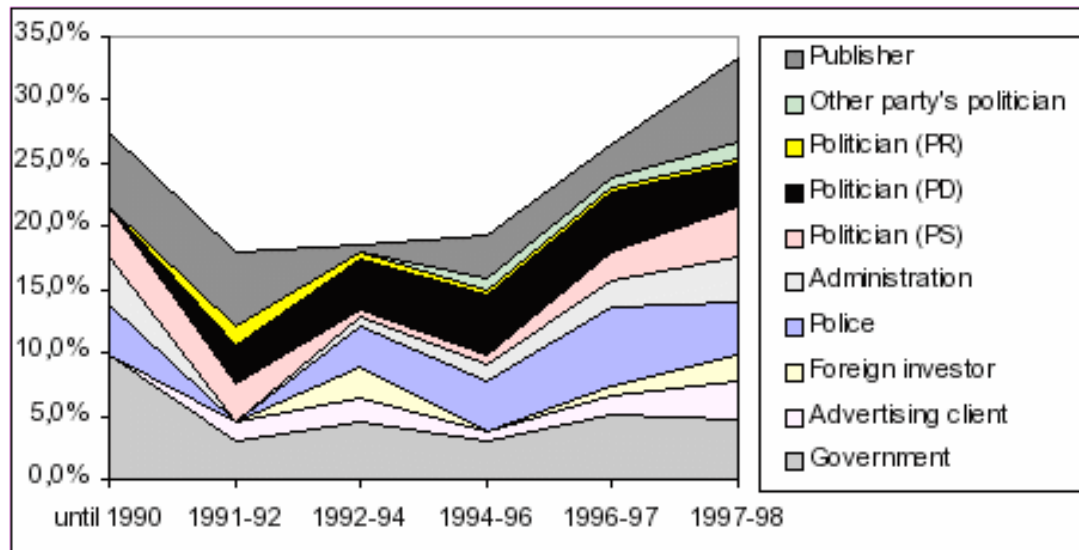
	Before 1990	1991-92	1992-94	1994-96	1996-97	1997-98
Government	5	2	7	7	13	13
Advertising customer		1	3	2	4	8
Foreign investor			4		2	6
Police	2		5	9	16	11
Administration	2		1	3	5	10
Politician (PS)	2	2	1	2	6	11
Politician (PD)		2	6	11	12	9

Politician (PR)		1	1	1	1	1
Other party's politician				2	2	4
Publisher	3	4	1	8	7	18
Total	14	12	29	45	68	91

This table shows that nine of the 109 journalists who had been working since 1994-1996 remembered in 1998 that the police had tried to influence their reporting during that period. Multiple choices were possible. Every respondent could report harassment by public authorities (at most 10 marks per period). The diagram below puts these quantities in relation to the proportional share of those journalists who answered yes to at least one of these questions; for example 1994-1996: 21 out of 109 or 19.3 percent.

Recalled "attempts to influence" by public authority

Representation of multiple choice in relation to the total amount of complaining journalists



Perceived attempts to influence reporting

One third of the respondents said that external forces had tried to influence their reporting at least once, especially the police, the government, the publisher, and the two largest political parties. The total percentage of "attempts to influence" increased from 1992.

The greatest pressure was perceived during the communist dictatorship until 1991, and then again during the uprising [3] and afterwards (1996-1998). Over 25 percent stated that someone had tried to influence their reporting at that time. Compared with this, the two phases of the Berisha government 1992-1996 were quite calm.

In 1992 there was the most liberal climate, with "only" 18 percent of journalists reporting "attempts to influence." The pressure from the government and the Democrat Party (Partia Demokratike, PD) was less obvious in the beginning of Berisha's presidency in 1992 than after the constitutional crisis of 1994. The influence of the Socialist Party (Partia Socialiste, PS) arose only after the uprising, and with their victory in the 1997 elections, an increase of "attempts to influence" by the - now socialist - government were recorded in the survey.

Particularly journalists of the respective opposition party papers and from the State radio and TV stations said they had been under pressure from the government, under Berisha as under Nano. During the uprising in 1997 there was sharp pressure from the police, that was perceived primarily by independent newspapers. The influence of foreign investors rose slightly during the recovery phases in 1992-94 and 1998, but was not perceived as significantly as that of other forces.

The various media reported the pressure of different forces. Journalists of the daily *Zëri i Popullit* scarcely noticed any influence except for that exerted by the Socialist Party PS (as its publisher and as a political party); journalists of independent media frequently reported "attempts to influence" by the government, administration, and police, and the Democrat Party, PD, between 1992 and 1997. Reports of "attempts to influence" by the PS, the government and the police rose from the conservative media after the 1997 elections. State radio and television journalists more

frequently reported “attempts to influence“ by the government, the police, the PD and – since the 1997 elections as well – of the PS.

Perceived threats of violence

Almost half the respondents stated that they had been physically threatened at least once (63 respondents or 48.1 percent). This demonstrates that the social climate in which the journalists have to work is quite a violent one.

The journalists of the socialist, conservative and independent press as well as the State television and radio stations RSH, TVSH and Radio Tirana perceived the level of violence of the recent periods in different ways. During this time, employees of the State radio and television stations did not experience high-intensity threats. Employees of the independent press went through a period of increased threats during the 1997 uprising. Loosely affiliated papers and the party papers experienced the greatest threat when the respective party was in opposition: the Socialists from 1992 to 1996, and the Democrats from 1997 to 1998. The newspaper *Republika* from the small republican party was under pressure during both governments: both between 1994 and 1996 and from 1997 to 1998 more of their journalists reported an increase in threats.

The climax of the recalled “attempts to influence” and threats of violence in 1998 was even higher than the rate in 1991. The reason for this was probably that the impressions of 1998 were still fresh, and that many journalists working in 1991 were no longer active.

High staff turnover and the fact that journalists who reported never having been threatened or harassed are over-represented in former years suggests that the pressure of different forces has caused some journalists to give up their jobs, and that a number of threatened victims do not work as journalists anymore.

Threats of Violence by Political Spectrum

The number of respondents who recalled that they had been physically threatened in this period (by media type)

The number of respondents, which remembered that they had been physically threatened in this period (by media type)

	untill 1990	1991-92	1992-94	1994-96	1996-97	1997-98
Zëri I Popullit (socialist)	0,0%	14,3%	50,0%	44,4%	16,7%	0,0%
Number of respondents	0 of 4	1 of 7	4 of 8	4 of 9	2 of 12	0 of 12
Independent press, magazines [4]	9,1%	5,9%	12,9%	14,0%	31,4%	21,8%
Number of respondents	1 of 11	1 of 17	4 of 31	6 of 43	16 of 51	12 of 55
Conservative media [5]	9,1%	11,1%	16,7%	15,6%	17,5%	47,6%
Number of respondents	1 of 11	2 of 18	4 of 24	5 of 32	7 of 40	20 of 42
State Radio/TV [6]	9,1%	7,1%	5,9%	10,5%	5,0%	9,5%
Number of respondents	1 of 11	1 of 14	1 of 17	2 of 19	1 v.20	2 of 21

Internal freedom of the press

Only a small proportion of the journalists complained about the interventions of their editors-in-chief. Most denied that texts had been modified in their meaning, or that the publisher had a decisive impact on the opinion published. [\[7\]](#) 7.3 percent of the respondents recalled “attempts to influence” by the publisher. Among party papers, more than one fifth of respondents recalled “attempts to influence” by the publishing party. Apart from the rather calm period in 1992-1994, the presence of the publisher was always noticeable, even in the phase of greatest liberality after the change of 1991-1992.

The political parties’ relationship to journalism is of special interest: as the majority of daily papers are either partially affiliated or belong to a party outright, party papers determine the public discussion as the lead media, and the public sphere is overheated by party politics. [\[8\]](#)

Only a few respondents indicated that journalists should be actively engaged in a party (8.8 percent or 12 out of 121). But every fifth journalist surveyed would not object if journalists’ political engagement would affect their work. Every third respondent could imagine engaging in politics personally, and nearly every second (44.2 percent) was indeed a member of a party.

The majority of party paper journalists were members of the respective party, but party membership was not required as a prerequisite for a journalist’s employment. According to Luan Rama, then editor in chief of *Zëri i Popullit*, the parties regard their papers less as an instrument of propaganda than as a potential source of revenue, so

they push for competitiveness rather than for the party line. *Zëri i Popullit* tried to achieve editorial independence from the party and did not want to be a central organ of the party leadership. [9] Most respondents agreed with Rama's view and rated the pressure from the parties as "small."

The problems that journalists face, and which obstruct free reporting are instead problems of funding and infrastructure. Only 16.2 percent of the respondents said they had sufficient financial means for investigative reporting. Three out of four (77.9 percent) reported a lack of means for such expenses. Only 7.4 percent stated that the "economic situation of this media enterprise is good enough to enable it to control the government."

Self-image as indicator for the editorial working conditions

Another section of the questionnaire addressed the Albanian journalist's self-image. It provides some information about the kind of journalism that the structure and working conditions in Tirana's editorial offices support best. [10] The professional ideals of Albanian and German journalists are quite similar, as a rank correlation showed, and the professional aims of German and Albanian journalists partially correspond. But the goals they try to reach do not achieve the intended results, because "aims" and "perceived success in achieving these aims" do not correlate significantly. [11]

More surprising is the strong correlation between the German ideal and the Albanian "perceived success in achieving these aims." From the survey it appears that in working as a journalist for the Albanian media, it is possible to easily and effectively do what German journalists regard as good journalism: report verified information in a neutral, precise, fast and reasonable way, and explain complex facts. The working conditions in the Tirana editorial offices in 1998 promoted Western (German) ideals of journalism rather than the ideals of their employees. The individual journalist in Albania rarely succeeds in doing what German journalists regard as less important: providing a check on government, the economy and society, discussing national policy, and setting the national agenda. In particular, reviewing official statements is much more an aim of Albanian than of German journalism, because according to Albanian journalists, the reputation of the Albanian administration and government is very low.

Final remark

The indicators used are quite sensitive, because they collect subjectively perceived "attempts to influence" and perceived threats of violence, rather than objective, measurable damages to the freedom of the press. Indeed, the Albanian journalists felt the social climate in which they had to work was a violent one. But if every second journalist was physically threatened at any one time within the eight years from 1991 to 1998, this is not an alarming average.

Newspapers and stations apparently supported a certain amount of freedom of opinion among journalists (which was not damaged by the quite low, but constant presence of the publishers' opinions), but journalists could not take full advantage of this environment due to the lack of means for investigation.

The patterns of threats and harassment reported by journalists over this period suggest that media identified with opposition parties or views are regularly the subject of intimidation. Considering the way political campaigns are held in Albania [12] this could point to surviving authoritarian structures, to one-party ethics, which echoes patriarchal family structures distancing the opposition, like a stranger or a traitor, to an outside sphere. [13]

Footnotes

[1] A detailed description of the survey can be found in R. Schmidt, *Selbstbild, Situation und Soziodemographie albanischer Journalisten 1998*, Berlin, 2003, available here: <http://userpage.fu-berlin.de> .

[2] Periods are defined by the political changes in Albania: the Communist dictatorship until 1990, transitional governments 1991-1992, the consolidation of the country under Berisha 1992-1994, the Berisha regime 1994-1996, the uprising in 1996-1997, the consolidation of the country under Nano 1997-1998.

[3] After 1994 Berisha's government became increasingly authoritarian, jailing the opposition leader Nano, trying to prohibit his Socialist Party and to change the Constitution. In the 1996 elections Berisha's defeat was only prevented by obvious manipulations and massive obstruction of the opposition. When the so-called "pyramids" (speculative investment companies) collapsed in January 1997 and most people lost their savings, a rebellion broke out in the south of Albania, where the socialist supporters were the majority. It claimed about 1,600 casualties, caused public order collapse and nearly split Albania. See R. Schmidt, "Öffentlichkeit und Zeitungen in Albanien. Historischer Überblick," in R. Schmidt, *Massenmediale Öffentlichkeit in Albanien 1979 und 1998 am Beispiel einer Inhaltsanalyse zur Themen- und Meinungsvielfalt in Tiraner Tageszeitungen*, Magisterarbeit im Fach Publizistik-



und Kommunikationswissenschaft an der Freien Universität Berlin, 2002, pp. 156-158, available here: <http://userpage.fu-berlin.de> . See also, M. Rüb, "Schatten über Skanderbegs Adler. Albanien nach der Ablehnung des Verfassungsentwurfs," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 26 November 1994, p. 7, and International Commission on the Balkans, *Unfinished Peace. Report of the International Commission on the Balkans*, Berlin: Aspen Institute, 1996, p. 124.

[4] *Bota e Sportit, Deutsche Welle, Enter, Ausländische Medien, Gazeta Shqiptare, Hostemi, Koha Jone, Klan, Revista Koha, Shekulli, Sport Ekspres.*

[5] 55, *Albania, Radio Kontakt, Rilindja Demokratike, Republika.*

[6] *Radio Tirana, Radio Television Shqiptare, Television Shqiptare.*

[7] Five-point scale from +2 (=agree totally) until 2 (=do not agree at all).

"Did the editor, instead of just editing, change the meaning of content?"

Mean 0,99, Std. dev.=1,186, n=131.

"Decisive influence of publisher on published opinion":

Mean 0,61, Std. dev. 1,449, n=128.

[8] A discussion of the Albanian public sphere and its partial bias can be found in Schmidt (2002), pp. 127-145.

[9] Interview with Luan Rama in June 1998.

[10] The complete description in Schmidt (2003), pp. 25-41, pp. 44-45.

[11] The basis for comparison is taken from Armin Scholl, Siegfried Weischenberg, *Journalismus in der Gesellschaft. Theorie, Methodologie und Empirie*, Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1998, p. 165, pp. 305-356.

[12] Schmidt (2002) pp. 138-146.

[13] See N. Reiter, "Entmännlichung durch Alkohol" in D. Burkhart, ed., *Körper, Essen und Trinken im Kulturverständnis der Balkanvölker*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1991, pp. 229-237.