

# Public Broadcasting in Albania: Between Legacy and Future Opportunities

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## Introduction

Public service broadcasting in Albania remains an area in need of reform. Despite the progress achieved in recent years, it remains difficult for the public broadcaster to shed its reputation of a propaganda arm of the government, on one hand, and assert itself as a powerful player in the media market, on the other. At the same time, since Albania has adopted a dual broadcasting system, the role of the public broadcaster has been hailed as essential for society and a driver for the development of the entire media industry.

In this context, the current report is a brief overview of the main challenges facing the public broadcaster, such as its mandate, structure, funding model, place in the media market, relations to politics and manner of adapting to digitalisation. As the public broadcasting system is complex and faces numerous challenges, the report can only briefly touch upon a handful of the many issues related to the current state-of-play of public service media in Albania.

## History of public service media in Albania

The public service broadcaster is called *Radio Televizioni Shqiptar* (Radio Television of Albania – RTSH) and consists of Radio Tirana, on the one hand, *Televizioni Shqiptar* (Albanian Television – TVSH), on the other. Radio Tirana started broadcasting in 1938 and the TVSH followed in 1960. During the entire communist period, these were the only electronic media available to Albanians and all foreign media were subject to a blanket ban. Similar to the press and many other organisations at the time, the RTSH was also rigidly controlled by party-political bodies and in fact constituted a major propaganda tool – a legacy that has proven so difficult to overcome after all those years. ‘In the early 70s, the communist party leadership issued a

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directive stipulating that the country was to be also governed by radio and television, serving a role that until then had been played mainly by [the party newspaper] *Zëri i Popullit*.”<sup>1</sup>

The transition from one-party rule to a multi-party system in the 1990s brought media liberalisation, allowing the emergence of private newspapers first, followed by private radio and television in 1995. This situation required new regulations, and eventually the Parliament enacted the Law on Public and Private Radio and Television in 1998. This law marked the formal transformation of the RTSH from a state-owned institution into a public service media.<sup>2</sup> Until then, the RTSH was still considered a state-owned entity and remained under the strong influence of the ruling parties and, very much still regarded as a continuation of the propaganda mechanism that had existed during the communist regime.

The model that the law established was similar to the European public broadcaster model, obliging the RTSH to provide public service content and respond to the diverse needs of society at large. Although the first law was amended several times and a new law on audio-visual media was subsequently enacted in 2013, the basic structure remains that of a dual system: a public service broadcaster charged with producing content serving the country as a whole, commercial operators subject to only minimum requirements in terms of public interest.

### Structure of the broadcasting system

According to the law the Albanian Radio and Television is a not-for-profit legal entity operating under public law with the aim of providing public media service in Albania.<sup>3</sup> According to its mission statement the RTSH provides quality programmes to ‘inform, educate, and entertain the public, serving the nation and all social groups, including ethnic minorities’.<sup>4</sup> The

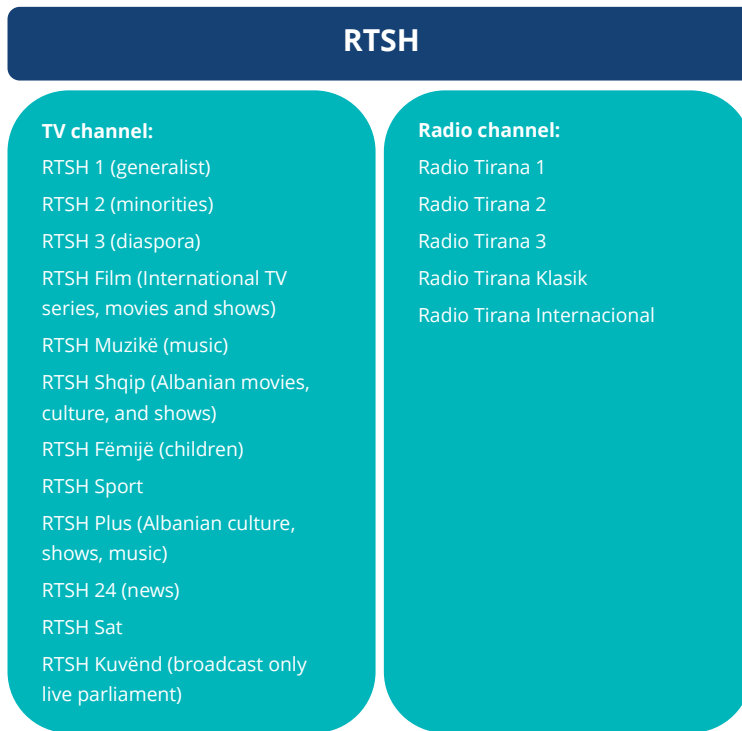
<sup>1</sup> Marash Hajati (2004) RTSH, profil i nje mediumi kontradiktor [RTSH, Profile of a Controversial Medium] *Monitori Shqiptar i medias*, no. 1, p. 71.

<sup>2</sup> Ilda Londo (2005) ‘Albania’, in *TV Across Europe*, osi/eumap, Budapest.

<sup>3</sup> Law on Audio-visual Media Nr. 97/2013, amended by Law No. 22/2016 of 10.3.2016, amended by Decision no. 56 dated 27.07.2016 of the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Albania and Law no. 91/2017, Art. 90, <http://ama.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/LIGJI-NR.-972013-%E2%80%9CP%C3%8BR-MEDIAT-AUDIOVIZIVE-N%C3%8B-REPUBLIK%C3%8BN-E-SHQIP%C3%8BRIS%C3%8BE2%80%9D-I-NDRYSHUAR.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, Art. 91.

mission of the RTSH also includes reporting news without any bias and producing programmes that meet diverse needs in all areas of public life.<sup>5</sup>



From the administrative point of view, the law establishes three governing bodies of the RTSH: a Steering Council, a Director-General and an Administrative Board.<sup>6</sup> The Steering Council has decision-making power and assists the Director-General in an advisory capacity. The Director-General is the chief executive officer of the public broadcaster, in charge of setting strategy, running day-to-day operations, and ensuring that the RTSH fulfils its mission. The Administrative Board advises the Steering Council and is in charge of preparing analyses on financial matters relating to the RTSH, except programming.<sup>7</sup> The third body is the recently established Council of Viewers and Listeners, composed of one-third RTSH employees and two-thirds representatives of various social groups. It is in charge of guaranteeing

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, Art. 92.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, Art. 107.

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the representation of the listeners' and viewers' interest in relation to RTSH content.<sup>8</sup> Changes made to the regulation have almost always focused on the need to secure the independence of the public broadcaster management and its governing bodies. The degree to which this independence has actually been achieved, however, remains a subject of debate. Please see the section on independence of the public broadcaster for an in-depth discussion. The section also explains the election process of the institutions within the structure of the RTSH.

### Programme mandate

The law<sup>9</sup> lists several general values, principles and aims supposed to guide RTSH activity, for example:

- › meeting the needs of the whole population and promoting Albanian language and culture;
- › supporting democratic values, especially the right to information and exposing the public to traditions of other countries, especially in Europe;
- › reflecting cultural diversity in programme content by covering an array of activities and fields, guided by respect for human dignity;
- › providing national and international news and current affairs coverage, etc.

In fulfilling its public service mission, the RTSH should include in its free programmes at least:<sup>10</sup>

- › two national audio-visual programmes (meaning TV);
- › two national audio programmes of a general nature (meaning radio);
- › one audio programme in foreign languages, dealing mainly with news and culture;
- › one audio programme for Albanians abroad, again mainly news and culture;
- › regional centres and programmes of a general nature;
- › one audio-visual satellite programme of a general nature;
- › one programme directly broadcasting the sessions of parliament.

The RTSH signal should reach at least 90 percent of the population in Albania and at least one of the networks should have reached a coverage of 99 percent

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, Art. 112.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, Art. 118.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, Art, 119.

of the population within five years of the enactment of the law. i.e. in 2018.<sup>11</sup> According to the regulator (Audio-visual Media Authority) in 2018 the RTSH covered 70 percent of the population through digital broadcasting<sup>12</sup> whereas the RTSH claims that its signal reaches 97 percent of the population.<sup>13</sup> The RTSH may establish an independent fund in order to support independent productions<sup>14</sup> while the own productions of the RTSH should account for at least 50 percent of the broadcasting time.<sup>15</sup>

### The quest for an adequate funding system

The funding model of the public broadcaster is mixed, allowing a variety of financing sources. These sources include a licence fee, advertising, contracts with third parties for the rental of technical equipment, sales of own productions, sales of content produced by the RTSH, and funding from the state budget.<sup>16</sup> The central government subsidy, i.e. the component financed by the taxpayer, is subject to change annually, as provided for in the Law on the Annual State Budget. The funding from the state budget is used to finance the following aspects of RTSH work:<sup>17</sup>

- › the audio and audio-visual broadcasting services for Albanians abroad and the service in foreign languages;
- › major technical projects for the introduction of new production and broadcasting technologies;
- › major projects for the production of films or other national artistic activities;
- › the RTSH symphony orchestra and cinematography department.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, Art. 121.

<sup>12</sup> AMA Annual Report 2018, [http://ama.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/RAPORT\\_VJETOR.pdf](http://ama.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/RAPORT_VJETOR.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> RTSH Annual Report 2018, [http://parlament.al/Files/Kerkese/20190416130358RAPORT%20VJETOR-2018\\_ePLOTE\\_OK.pdf](http://parlament.al/Files/Kerkese/20190416130358RAPORT%20VJETOR-2018_ePLOTE_OK.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, Art. 123.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, Art. 124.

<sup>16</sup> Law on Audio-visual Media Nr. 97/2013, amended by Law No. 22/2016 of 10.3.2016, amended by Decision no. 56 dated 27.07.2016 of the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Albania and Law no. 91/2017, Art.113, <http://ama.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/LIGJI-NR.-972013-%E2%80%99CP%C3%8BR-MEDIAT-AUDIOVIZIVE-N%C3%8B-REPUBLIK%C3%8BN-E-SHQIP%C3%8BRIS%C3%8BE2%80%9D-I-NDRYSHUAR.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., Art.116.

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The biggest part of RTSH funding comes through the licence fee. In 2018, the total RTSH budget currently stands at 2 248 320 Albanian Lek (ALL) (app. 18 million Euro). The licence fee accounts for 53 percent of this amount, the state budget accounting for 30 percent and the remaining 17 percent being raised from advertising and contracts with third parties.<sup>18</sup> The management of the RTSH has been persistently proposing a change in the licence fee scheme that would create a stronger and more financially independent public broadcaster. Until 2011 the licence fee was very low (approx. 4.5 Euro per household per year). It doubled in 2012, in order to increase funds for digitalisation projects. Currently, every household pays about 80 eurocents per month in licence fee, which is tacked on to the electricity bill. This the lowest licence fee in the Western Balkans and, in fact, in all Europe. The management of the RTSH has repeatedly petitioned the Parliament seeking an increase of the licence fee in order to strengthen the financial viability of the broadcaster but this request has not been granted to date as it is considered a tax burden on citizens.

RTSH staff have also complained in the latest report of the company that the licence fee is not actually being collected consistently and that the overall amounts received have decreased in the last three years. Delays in the RTSH receiving the funds – the electricity company has not been forwarding the money in a timely fashion – have caused further financial difficulties for the public broadcaster, the fee being its main source of income.<sup>19</sup> RTSH staff have insisted on greater transparency as regards licence fee collection. They have also requested that the collection charge kept by the electricity company be lowered from 10 to 2 percent. This indicates that if the situation does not improve, the RTSH will not be able to survive without an increase in funding from the state budget.<sup>20</sup>

Another financial problem for the RTSH has been the switch from analogue to digital broadcasting. The National Strategy for Digital Switchover has allocated two national digital networks<sup>21</sup> to the public broadcaster that can be used to host RTSH programmes and also, for a fee, made available to other local broadcasters. The process of building the digital networks has been overly protracted, rife with controversy and a heavy financial burden on the public broadcaster. A second

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<sup>18</sup> RTSH Annual Report 2018, [http://parlament.al/Files/Kerkese/20190416130358RAPORT%20VJETOR-2018\\_ePLOTE\\_OK.pdf](http://parlament.al/Files/Kerkese/20190416130358RAPORT%20VJETOR-2018_ePLOTE_OK.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> In the law foreseen is that RTSH has two national frequencies, for building two digital networks or platforms.

problem concerns the fees that local operators were supposed to pay the RTSH for the use of its digital networks. The fees in question were supposed to significantly help the RTSH cover the operating costs of the networks. After complaints from local operators and on the insistence of the Audio-visual Media Authority (AMA), however, the fee was greatly reduced, creating yet another hole in the budget of the RTSH.<sup>22</sup> Finally, the delays have resulted in a prolonged transition period where both analogue and digital broadcasting are available, further adding to RTSH's immediate expenses and, in the absence of a final deadline for analogue switch-off, compounding long-term budget uncertainty.<sup>23</sup>

### Media landscape in Albania: a constant evolution

In terms of the number of media outlets, the Albanian media landscape is well saturated. Although print media are clearly in decline, 18 daily newspapers are still being published in a small country of less than three million inhabitants. The media landscape of audio-visual media is fairly dynamic. According to the Authority on Audio-Visual Media there are 49 local radio stations, four community radio stations belonging to the four main religious denominations in the country, two national private radio stations, and the public radio with its four local branches.<sup>24</sup> There are also 47 local television stations, 75 cable televisions, and five national commercial multiplexes with their respective programmes operating across Albania, in addition to the public broadcaster's digital platform with 12 programmes.<sup>25</sup>

Recent years have seen an exponential growth in the number of online media, although there is no reliable information about this segment of the media market since online media are not regulated and under no obligation to register. The Union of Albanian Journalists suggests that there are now more than 800 online media outlets in the country.<sup>26</sup> In addition, social media use has

<sup>22</sup> RTSH Annual Report 2018, [http://parlament.al/Files/Kerkese/20190416130358RAPORT%20VJETOR-2018\\_ePLOTE\\_OK.pdf](http://parlament.al/Files/Kerkese/20190416130358RAPORT%20VJETOR-2018_ePLOTE_OK.pdf).

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Thoma Gellci, General Director of RTSH, April 2018, qtd. in Albanian Media Institute (2018) Albanian media scene vs. European standards: Report based on Council of Europe's indicators for Media in a Democracy, <http://www.institutemedia.org/Documents/PDF/Albanian%20Media%20Scene%20vs%20European%20Standards.pdf>.

<sup>24</sup> Audiovisual Media Authority (AMA), List of operators: <http://ama.gov.al/subjekte-te-autorizuar-per-perseritjen-e-programit-audioviziv/#>.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Interview with Aleksander Cipa, Chairman of Union of Albanian Journalists, conducted in Tirana on 7 May 2019, for the purpose of this publication.

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spread significantly, with Facebook as the most widely used social network. In 2018, there were 1.5 million active social media users in Albania.<sup>27</sup>

In this context, it is clear that Albanian consumers have plenty of choice in terms of information and entertainment. It is not clear, however, what the roles and respective weights of particular media outlets on the Albanian market are. The major media companies, mainly television stations, and major advertisers conduct market studies and audience research, but their data is widely considered unreliable.<sup>28</sup> While commercial media representatives claim that the public broadcaster's influence and popularity within the population is negligible according to the existing audience research, these claims have been consistently dismissed by the management of the RTSH. Given the dispute over data and market research, it is impossible to know with certainty what the respective market share and popularity of each medium in Albania really is.

### The search for guarantees of independence

During the transition period from a state broadcaster to a public service media, one of the main problems for the RTSH has been its perceived inability to act as a politically independent media, focusing on public interest rather than serving the interests of each party that comes to power. The public debate on this matter has remained alive, although it needs to be said that it is not always well-informed or grounded in well-researched data and analysis.

One of the main criticisms levied against the public broadcaster, for example, is that appointments are politically motivated, especially appointments to posts with decision-making authority. In fact, the struggle to find an appropriate formula guaranteeing fair representation of the various factions and interest groups has been relentless, often eclipsing other issues relating to the performance of public media.

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<sup>27</sup> Hootsuite (2018) We are social – Digital 2018 yearbook, 29 January, <https://www.slideshare.net/wearesocial/2018-digital-yearbook-86862930>.

<sup>28</sup> IREX (2019) Media Sustainability Index 2019 – Albania, <https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/pdf/media-sustainability-index-europe-eurasia-2019-albania.pdf>.



Currently, the public broadcaster has three main governing bodies – a Steering Council, a Director-General and an Administrative Board.<sup>29</sup> One of the key competencies of the Steering Council is the appointment or dismissal of the Director-General. It also appoints or dismisses the Deputy Director-General and is in charge of founding documents such as the RTSH Statute and the overall organisational and programme structure.<sup>30</sup> The ten members of the Steering Council and its chair are elected by Parliament from nominations put forth by media associations, the academy, the bar association and human rights organisations.<sup>31</sup> Steering Council members must not be members of political parties, candidates for parliament, or members of parliament in either of the two most recent legislatures, and cannot have been mayors, members of the Council of Ministers, or prefects at any point in the last three years.<sup>32</sup> In addition, members or employees of the Council of Complaints and the Authority on Electronic and Postal Communications are also excluded from running. Another reason for exclusion is the possession of capital assets or shares in commercial companies and other stakes in the field of audio-visual media, advertising, audio-visual productions, electronic communication networks. Persons employed in or members of management bodies, advisors to such entities or people otherwise linked to such entities with a licence cannot serve on the Steering Council either.

The initial idea of the formula, based on accepting proposals from civil society organisations operating in different fields to be put forth for consideration to the Steering Council, had a two-fold aim: ensure representation of various interest groups and areas representing public interest and, more importantly, avoid political influence through nominations proposed by the civil society. However, while nominations do come from civil society Steering Committee members are still selected by Members of Parliament. After reviewing all nominations, the members of the Parliamentary Committee on Education and Public Information compile a shortlist by a process where the opposition and the ruling majority take turns in striking off nominations to ensure a balanced shortlist at the end that contains five nominations supported by the opposition

<sup>29</sup> Law on Audio-visual Media Nr. 97/2013, amended by Law No. 22/2016 of 10.3.2016, amended by Decision no. 56 dated 27.07.2016 of the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Albania and Law no. 91/2017, Art. 92, <http://ama.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/LIGJI-NR.-972013-%E2%80%9CP%C3%8BR-MEDIAT-AUDIOVIZIVE-N%C3%8B-REPUBLIK%C3%8BN-E-SHQIP%C3%8BRIS%C3%8B%E2%80%9D-I-NDRYSHUAR.pdf>.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, Art. 102.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, Art. 94.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, Art. 97.

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and five by the ruling majority.<sup>33</sup> The most favoured candidates are then voted on in a plenary session of Parliament.

The appointment scheme was subject to prolonged discussion in Parliament at the time of drafting and debating the law. Still, doubts regarding the political independence of the Steering Council members remain, even though the formula seems to avoid party nominations and preferences. 'Although the law requires a long experience in media and other fields, with a wide representation of groups, including various NGOs and interest groups, the allegations that in essence most of the members are politically influenced and affiliated, remain.'<sup>34</sup>

The tendency of the Steering Council to split along party lines in important votes is the most tangible evidence of party influence. Notably, this was the case in the election of the current Director-General of the RTSH. The director is elected by the Steering Council. When the opposition attacked the current director as a candidate linked to the ruling party, the Steering Council could not elect a new Director-General in 2015, even after three rounds of voting. The votes for the two candidates were consistently split 6 to 5, indicating that there were two camps, possibly aligned with the two major political parties, with very clear and persistent preferences. In the words of the current Director-General: 'The members of the Steering Council were divided into two military groups, facing each other.'<sup>35</sup> Faced with a deadlock, the ruling majority in the Parliament initiated a process that changed the formula of election. Originally, the law required three-fifths of the votes of the Steering Council to elect the Director-General. Under the new rules, a simple majority is sufficient, if the qualified majority cannot be reached in the first three rounds.<sup>36</sup> This amendment passed with the votes of the ruling party only. The opposition considered the reform to be an attempt on the part of the ruling majority to take control of the management of the public broadcaster. While this was an extreme case of political division and influence on the public broadcaster, it is also evidence that the formula

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, Art. 95.

<sup>34</sup> Albanian Media Institute (2018) Albanian media scene vs. European standards: Report based on Council of Europe's indicators for Media in a Democracy, <http://www.institutemedia.org/Documents/PDF/Albanian%20Media%20Scene%20vs%20European%20Standards.pdf>.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Thoma Gellci, General Director of RTSH, April 2018, qtd. in Albanian Media Institute (2018) Albanian media scene vs. European standards: Report based on Council of Europe's indicators for Media in a Democracy, <http://www.institutemedia.org/Documents/PDF/Albanian%20Media%20Scene%20vs%20European%20Standards.pdf>.

<sup>36</sup> Law on Audiovisual Media, Art. 103.

selected for the appointment of the Steering Council and the election of the Director-General is neither particularly functional nor particularly successful at preventing political parties from exerting influence.

Apart from the general public debate and perception of public service media, however, there have been efforts to change the image of the RTSH as a propaganda tool of the government. The OSCE/ODIHR report on the general elections in June 2017 highlighted the fact that the public broadcaster had announced that it would not accept any party-produced footage. It also concluded that the RTSH news and information programmes clearly showed a balanced approach to campaign reporting, allocating 25 percent of its coverage to the Democratic Party, 24 percent to the Socialist Party, and 19 percent to the Socialist Movement for Integration; the tone of coverage was mostly neutral or positive.<sup>37</sup> At the same time, monitoring reports of main news editions regarding the percentage of coverage of political subjects also do not show the ruling majority to have received favourable treatment. In April 2019, the main news edition of the RTSH devoted 18 percent of the time to the main opposition party and 9 percent to the ruling majority party.<sup>38</sup> At the same time, the activities of the Prime Minister occupied 14 percent of the RTSH new broadcast time, which is lower than the corresponding numbers for the two main commercial TV stations – 22 percent and 19 percent, respectively, for Top Channel TV and Klan TV.<sup>39</sup> There are limitations to the measurement of political independence through the percentage of screen time in news editions but the result has been confirmed by other studies. In the latest Media Sustainability Index report, the panellists agreed that the public broadcaster does not cater to the government. Furthermore, opposition viewpoints are represented and enter into the public broadcaster's content.<sup>40</sup>

A step forward for the RTSH was the drafting and the approval of the Editorial Principles in 2016, a very detailed document covering many aspects of public service media work and many of the questions it is facing: editorial and professional standards, diversity and balanced reporting, electoral campaigns,

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<sup>37</sup> OSCE (2017) Albania, Parliamentary elections, 25 June 2017: Final Report, 28 September, <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/albania/346661>.

<sup>38</sup> Audiovisual Media Authority (2019) Media monitoring content reports, <http://ama.gov.al/monitorimi-i-permbajtjeve>.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> IREX (2019) Media Sustainability Index 2019 – Albania, <https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/pdf/media-sustainability-index-europe-eurasia-2019-albania.pdf>.

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reporting on politics and parliament, production standards, relations with state authorities, investigative reporting, respecting the values of the general public, programmes for groups with special interests, portrayal of specific social groups, children and minors in RTSH programmes, etc. The Editorial Principles have a special section on editorial independence which states that 'journalists should in any case respect the principle of autonomy and independence of the RTSH'.<sup>41</sup> The Editorial Principles also dedicate a section to how RTSH staff should behave towards state authorities, stating that 'editors and journalists should keep their professional distance from all instruments of power; otherwise they risk the integrity of the institution they work for'.<sup>42</sup> However, while the Editorial Principles are the first such document adopted by the public broadcaster, there is no self-regulatory mechanism within the public broadcasters that oversees the implementation of these principles in practice at this time.

### Attempt to catch up with the digital age: a race against time

The beginning of digital broadcasting was a challenge for the public broadcaster but also presented an opportunity to structure and address its programming better as well as improve the signal quality. Currently, the RTSH digital network broadcasts on 11 channels. Three of them are general interest while the others address specific audiences. These include a sport channel, a children's channel, a music channel, a movie channel, an Albanian production channel, a news channel, a channel that broadcasts parliamentary sessions, etc. In addition, there are also two local branches of the RTSH television; TV Gjirokastër and TV Korca (see illustration p. 29). One of the main achievements of the RTSH in 2018 was broadcasting the FIFA World Cup. For a long time, the World Cup had been broadcast by commercial digital pay TV platforms only. Last year Albanians were able to watch the World Cup for free.

The division of programmes has also enabled the RTSH to make progress in its mission to provide dedicated service to specific segments of the population. The RTSH2 has started broadcasting news in minority languages: Greek and Serbian in 2017, and Macedonian, Aromanian, and Romani in 2018.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> RTSH (n.d.) Editorial Principles, <https://www.rtsh.al/parimet-editoriale-te-rtsh-se>.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> RTSH Annual Report 2018, [http://parlament.al/Files/Kerkese/20190416130358RAPORT%20VJETOR-2018\\_ePLOTE\\_OK.pdf](http://parlament.al/Files/Kerkese/20190416130358RAPORT%20VJETOR-2018_ePLOTE_OK.pdf).

Even though the RTSH has made progress in enriching its programme content, aided by the digitalisation process, its mission is still not accomplished. The regulator, the Audio-visual Media Authority, has noted in its annual report that even though progress is evident, there are still some gaps that need to be filled, such as the opening of the second children's channel, the production of news editions in an all-news channel, and the opening of a lifestyle channel.<sup>44</sup>

In terms of available channels, the RTSH makes use of digital broadcasting through the digital networks it has built as well as through its website and other online channels. The RTSH website offers access to three main general channels plus seven specialty channels. Their live broadcasting and the five existing radio programmes are available on the official website. However, video on demand and a more searchable database of programmes is not yet available. The RTSH has also produced its own mobile app, 'RTSH tani' [RTSH Now]. All RTSH channels and content are available online. Apart from the official website, RTSH programmes are available on the RTSH YouTube channel, which currently has more than 30 000 subscribers. These developments have certainly affected the work of journalists at the RTSH. News stories are covered both on the RTSH website and on Radio Tirana International, the RTSH website in foreign languages. Furthermore, apart from content uploaded to YouTube, there are Facebook pages for Radio Tirana, Radio Tirana 2, the RTSH, and for the regional studios. These pages contain mainly excerpts from programmes but also original content produced for the web. In addition, some of the TV programmes and journalists also have their own pages promoting the content of their respective programmes. Nonetheless, the RTSH recognises the need for further training in this regard. 'There is a need to organise and train staff, in order to guarantee full success of the reform process in terms of production and presentation',<sup>45</sup> the annual report states with regard to the digitalisation framework.

### Challenges to the future of the public broadcaster

Public service media is not a particularly hot topic in Albania, and, in fact, the debate is often dominated by the conduct of commercial media rather than that of the public broadcaster. This situation is a result of several factors,

<sup>44</sup> AMA Annual Report 2018.

<sup>45</sup> RTSH Annual Report 2018, [http://parlament.al/Files/Kerkese/20190416130358RAPORT%20VJETOR-2018\\_ePLOTE\\_OK.pdf](http://parlament.al/Files/Kerkese/20190416130358RAPORT%20VJETOR-2018_ePLOTE_OK.pdf).

such as the low influence of the RTSH on the public throughout the years, the preference of key politicians to attend political shows staged by commercial operators rather than by the public broadcaster, and occasional denigrating campaigns against the RTSH by commercial operators. In fact, a proper public debate in which both commercial and public actors participate and clarify matters for the public has been missing, often leading to the strengthening of prejudice and a perception of the RTSH that may not be entirely justified.

The latest controversy that became part of public debate was in June 2018, when the Association of Albanian Electronic Media, a group representing major owners and directors of media in the country, proposed an amendment to audio-visual media regulation to the regulator. The amendment would redirect part of the licence fee that funds the public broadcaster to the main commercial television stations in Albania.<sup>46</sup> More specifically, a broadcasting fund would be created and 30 percent of the licence fee would go to commercial television stations in order to support what the proposed amendment referred to as ‘broadcasting spots that raised public awareness’.<sup>47</sup> After the completion of the digital switchover, the funds of the licence fee would be split in half between public broadcaster and commercial broadcasters.<sup>48</sup> This request came at a time when the licence fee for the public broadcaster in Albania was the second lowest among EBU members already, second only to Algeria.<sup>49</sup> The proposed amendment, if passed, would cut the RTSH budget in half, if not worse, further causing its financial position to deteriorate more. At the moment, the proposal has not been followed up on by either Parliament or government, but it serves to show the continuous challenges the competition is creating for public service media.

<sup>46</sup> AMA (2018) Takim konsultativ në AMA për propozimet e grupeve të interesit për ndryshime në ligjin 97/2013 [Consultative meeting with interest groups regarding legal amendments to Law 97/2013], 11 June, <http://ama.gov.al/2018/06/11/takim-konsultativ-ne-ama-per-propozimet-e-grupeve-te-interesit-per-ndryshime-ne-ligjin-97-2013>.

<sup>47</sup> Proposed amendments to law 97/2013 by Association of Electronic Media, June 2018, <http://ama.gov.al/2018/06/11/takim-konsultativ-ne-ama-per-propozimet-e-grupeve-te-interesit-per-ndryshime-ne-ligjin-97-2013>. However, the proposals have not made it to the parliament. They were opposed by international actors, the public broadcaster, and media organisations. So the initiative was rejected by the government. See more European Commission (2019) Albania 2019 Report, <https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20190529-albania-report.pdf>.

<sup>48</sup> AMA (2018) Takim konsultativ në AMA për propozimet e grupeve të interesit për ndryshime në ligjin 97/2013 [Consultative meeting with interest groups regarding legal amendments to Law 97/2013], 11 June, <http://ama.gov.al/2018/06/11/takim-konsultativ-ne-ama-per-propozimet-e-grupeve-te-interesit-per-ndryshime-ne-ligjin-97-2013>.

<sup>49</sup> Darian Pavli (2017) RTSH in the digital era: the insecure situation of Albanian Radio and Television, Report, OSCE Annual Media Forum, Albania.

## Conclusions

The public broadcaster RTSH faces numerous challenges, both in terms of its internal organisation and regarding external factors. The election of its governing bodies remains part of the wider political battle and may indirectly influence RTSH operations and activity. Political balance and equal access of political parties to RTSH content seems to have improved, although the public broadcaster now seems to be at a greater risk of neglect from politics, rather than suffering its direct influence.

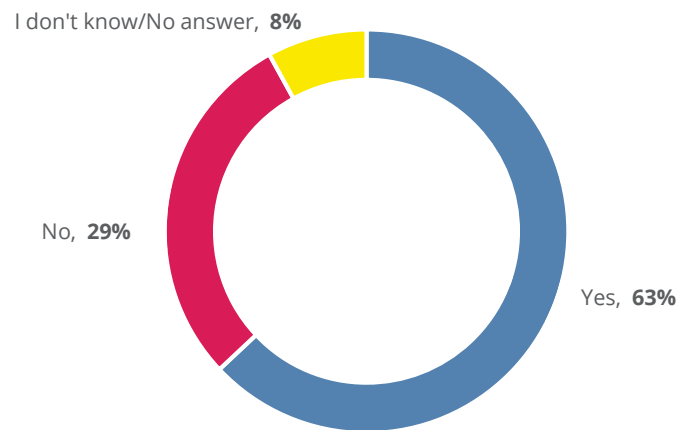
The funding scheme, while it has improved over the years, is still considered inadequate for RTSH needs by the management of the public broadcaster. The switch to digital has been a protracted, costly, and bumpy process, although RTSH has made progress in building its networks and has also improved its online presence through various channels and tools. At the same time, the need to produce high quality content and retain relevance to its own audience remain key challenges that the RTSH needs to address with a clear vision, in order to fulfil its public mission.



**Ilda Londo** has been a research coordinator at the Albanian Media Institute (AMI) since 2001. In this capacity, she deals with various research projects where AMI has been involved, such as study of trends that affect media freedom and independence, research on media ownership and concentration, monitoring performance of regulatory authorities and independent institutions on media development, ethnic minorities coverage, media landscape surveys, broadcasting development trends, self-regulation and ethical issues, etc.

## Opinion Poll Albania

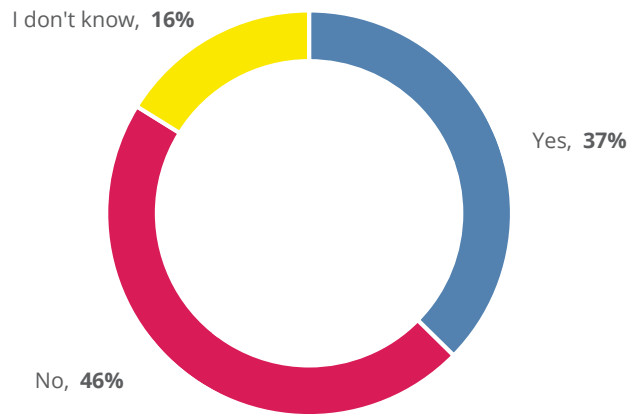
**Chart 1: Are Public Service Media (PSM) important for democracy in your country? (Base: Total Albanian sample, in percent)**



Two-thirds of Albanians believe that public service media (PSM) are important for the democratic processes in the country. This opinion is shared by all respondents regardless of their demographic profile (see Chart 1). However, this number is not as high as in other countries in the region. Thus, Albania is in the group of countries, together with North Macedonia (see p. 184), Montenegro (see p. 166) and Kosovo (see p. 127), where citizens are not seeing public service media (PSM) as important for democracy in comparison to other countries in the region.



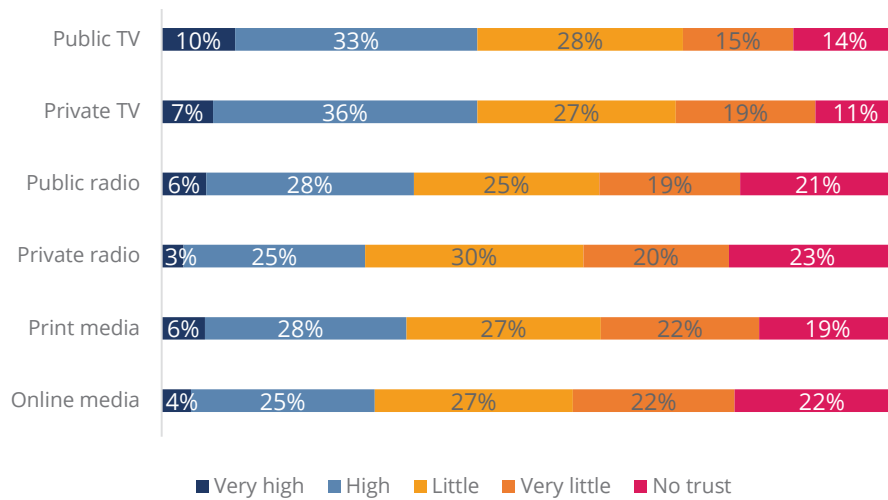
**Chart 2: In your opinion, are PSM free from political influence in your country? (Base: Total Albanian sample, in percent)**



There are not any statistically significant differences among citizens of Albania with regards to the question whether PSM are free from political influences. 37 percent think that PSM are free from political influence, 46 percent believe that the opposite is the case and that PSM are influenced by politics (see Chart 2). In the region, Albania has the highest percentage of respondents who believe that PSM are free from political influence.

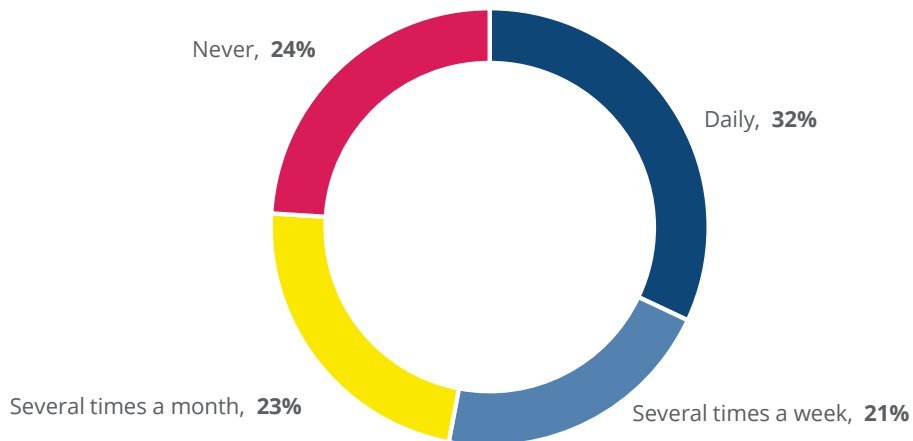
## A Pillar of Democracy on Shaky Ground

**Chart 3: How much trust do you have in following media? (Base: Total Albanian sample, in percent)**



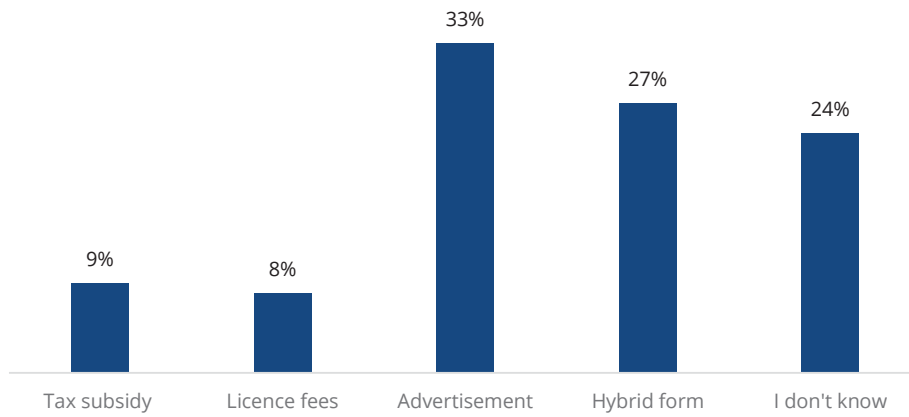
Compared to the region's averages, Albanians have higher trust in media. They also have higher trust in television in general (both private and public channels) in comparison to other media (see Chart 3). Opinions differ only with regard to the age of the Albanian citizens interviewed. The age group 64+ years has, in general, lower trust in the media as compared to citizens aged 50-64 years who have greater trust in all types of media.

**Chart 4: How often do you use the services of Public Service Media (PSM)?**  
(Base: Total Albanian sample, in percent)



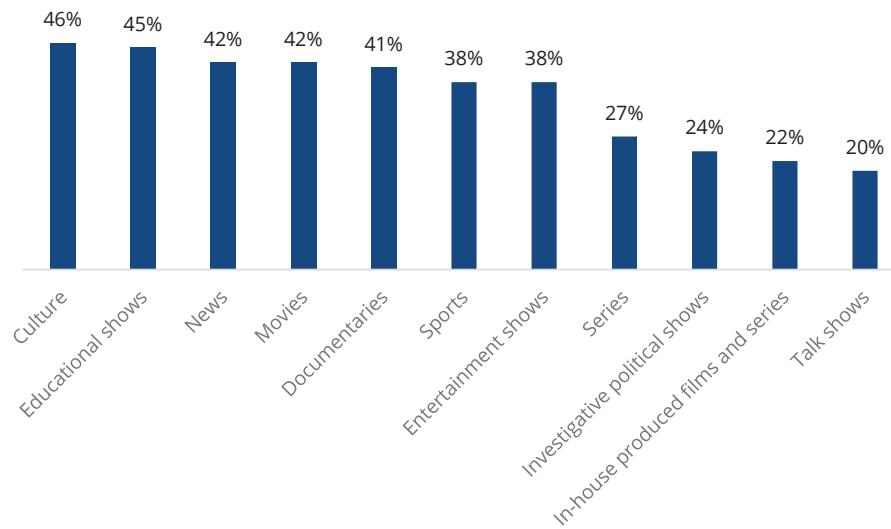
Albanians use the services of PSM less frequently compared to the citizens of other countries in the region. Only one-third uses PSM daily (see Chart 4) in comparison to the average for the region where PSM are used daily by half of the population. Significant differences among Albanian citizens are noted only with regard to their age. Only 21 percent of citizens aged 18-29 years use PSM daily in comparison to 42 percent of the respondents aged 50-64 years who have the same pattern of PSM use.

**Chart 5: What type of funding do you prefer for PSM? (Base: Total Albanian sample, in percent)**



Concerning the model of funding of public service media, Albanians do not have a clear preference. One-third of Albanians supports funding through advertising and 27 percent would prefer a mixed model of PSM funding (see Chart 5).

**Chart 6: What kind of content should PSM present? (Base: Total target population, in percent, multiple answers possible)**



Albanian citizens have less expectations on the content they like to watch as compared to the citizens of other countries in the region (see Chart 6). However, there are differences among certain demographic profiles. Men (55 percent) would prefer more sport programmes than women (23 percent) and younger people (aged 18-29 years) would like to see more movies, in-house productions, programmes, and series.