



South East European Network
for Professionalization of Media

Framing a Crisis in Albania:

The Lake Park Protests

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1. Introduction

The media system in Albania suffers from many weaknesses and in this respect global reports on media freedom point to a general stagnation. This research begins with the assumption that such weaknesses are demonstrated in media reporting particularly during crisis situations. Recent situations involving significant controversies and disagreements between the country's main stakeholders pertain to different kinds of citizen protests, and thus this research focuses on one of those crises, specifically on the media's coverage of the Lake Park protests in Albania.

The report aims to provide insight into the patterns of media reporting on this case and perceptions of the main stakeholders on the media's performance in this and in similar cases of crisis. It will also delve into the main underlying factors that determine how the media report on this and similar cases and provide some recommendations on how the different actors can work to enhance media reporting during social crises.

The research is based primarily on a frame analysis, interviews and secondary research. In order to understand the contextual factors, we will first provide a short overview of the media landscape and cases of crisis in Albania, after which the research results will be presented and analysed, followed by concluding remarks and recommendations.

1.1. Political interference and commercialisation

Some global monitoring initiatives devoted to the state of the media sector suggest that the media landscape in Albania has not changed in the last two years, with the media still burdened by the same problems.¹ The *Media Sustainability Index* scores indicate that free speech, professional journalism, pluralism of news sources and supporting institutions are close to being sustainable, while media business management is assessed to be the low and still lags behind the other indicators.² Other reports tend to be more critical. In the independent media indicator of *Nations in Transit*³ Albania scored 4.25 in 2016 (on a scale of 1 being highest, with 7 the lowest,) marking a deterioration, after years of stability in this area. According to this report, political bias in reporting is visible, and the commercial and political interests of the owners of media outlets often influence reporting.⁴ In this context, self-censorship and conformity characterise most journalists and editors in the country.⁵

¹ Reporters without Borders rank Albania 82nd. Source: *Press Freedom Index 2016*. MSI Scores are also unchanged.

² IREX, *Media Sustainability Index*, 2016

³ Freedom House, *Nations in Transit 2016*.

⁴ Ibid.

Albania's media landscape is characterised by a large number of media outlets for a country of less than three millions citizens. There are 20 daily newspapers, two national commercial TV stations, 67 local TV stations, 113 cable providers and cable channels, five satellite TV services, five national terrestrial multiplexes⁶, two national commercial radio stations, 68 local ones⁷ and public radio station and its branches in some of the main cities in the country. The number of online media remains unknown, but it has certainly boomed. According to the Union of Albanian Journalists, there might be as many as 650 online media and news websites present in Albania.⁸ All these media function in an advertising market that is considered to be relatively small, estimated at 38 million euros for 2015; advertising time and space seems to have decreased for TV and print in 2016, while online media has made progress, providing more space for advertising.⁹

In a context where transparency is lacking in respect of the sources of media funding and doubts exist about the way media survive in a relatively small market, there are also concerns that financial dependency limits editorial independence in Albanian media outlets. Previous studies have shown that both commercial advertising and public funds have been used to advertise in the media or to organise campaigns that have benefited media owners whose editorial policy is in line with the government or commercial companies (Londo, 2016:1). This pattern of influencing editorial independence is considered as a major factor that directly affects the quality of the reporting, which even the media owners themselves sometimes admit. "What is needed precisely is to dry up the media 'swamp' and restore dignity to information in Albania and to honest newspapers and publishers ... [this] is a serious, sober and profound operation of financial transparency."¹⁰

In spite of all the problems, public opinion about the media's conduct is more favourable than most other actors. A public opinion survey on the role of institutions in Albania, conducted in 2016, indicates that the media continue to be viewed as the most important actor in investigating violations of the law committed by high-ranking officials

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ List of TV operators, Audiovisual Media Authority. Available at <http://ama.gov.al/mediat/tv/>. Multiplexes have recently received licences, but the public broadcaster will still manage two of the remaining national terrestrial networks, where several programmes will be available.

⁷ List of radio operators, Audiovisual Media Authority. Available at <http://ama.gov.al/mediat/radio/>

⁸ Interview with Aleksander Cipa, chairman of the Union of Albanian Journalists, 30 January 2017.

⁹ O. Liperi, "Perpelitjet e tregut te reklamave, bien fitimet e televizioneve, gazetate ne krize, lulezon web", Monitor, 24 December 2016. Available at <http://www.monitor.al/perpelitjet-e-tregut-te-reklamave-bien-fitimet-e-televizioneve-gazetat-ne-krize-lulezon-web/>

¹⁰ C. Bollino, "Who is afraid of the media funding sources?" SEE Media Observatory, 3 May 2016, translated and republished with permission from Shqiptarja.com. Available at <http://mediaobservatory.net/radar/who-afraid-media-funding-sources>

(according to 69 per cent of respondents¹¹), even though this figure has fallen compared with data from 2014. However, journalists themselves and media experts often point to weaker professionalism in reporting. Lutfi Dervishi, a media expert, has pointed out that journalists and the media are increasingly giving up on the principle of verifying information by two sources. “Currently there is no careful reporting from journalists, and you really miss seeing news stories that have two sources in them, which indicates a decline in journalism” (Dervishi, quoted in IREX, 2016: 8.). Tabloidisation of the media, along with the fierce competition among similar media, e.g. news channels, often leads to the media valuing the rapidity of providing the news first to the public over having it confirmed or the quality of the information (IREX, 2016: 8.). In addition, self-censorship among journalists is the norm, in view of the particular political and economic interests their media owners might have, leading to a self-controlled view in media reports. A 2014 study on media integrity revealed through interviews with journalists that “when you understand the political leanings of the media you work for, you adapt to the editorial policy, as this makes your life easier” and journalists learn early which editorial lines they should not cross in the media where they work. (Londo, 2014:98). In this context, investigative journalism is the genre that suffers most. The Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) has tried to fill the void, but few TV programmes focus on investigations due to the media landscape itself, its manner of operations and self-censorship. For these reasons much more remains to be done in this respect.

1.2. Crises in Albania mostly short-lived, limited to protests

Crisis situations in Albania have not been particularly frequent or massive; most involve cases of public protests. Protests organised by political parties, mainly the opposition, have been a constant feature during the period of transition from the dictatorial regime, focusing on issues of bad governance related to economy, fundamental rights, political decisions, etc. For example, the opposition party announced in early February 2017 the start of massive protests against poor governance, poverty and corruption, which seems also to have been inspired by the mass protests in Romania during this period against the changes in anti-corruption laws.

Some recent protests have also targeted private companies and have also involved criticism of the state, in light of the contentious nature of the privatisation of state-owned companies (mainly the oil refiner ARMO, where workers did not receive salaries for months) and perceived corruption in privatised companies and the role of the state in those deals. For example, in the case of the oil drilling concern, Bankers Petroleum, people living around drilling areas complained of continual damage to their homes; thus, they resorted to protests to demand that the state compensate them, or to ensure that the company respects safety rules.

On the other hand civil society organisations, which work mainly on social issues, frequently protest about e.g. gender issues, child protection, discrimination and recently

¹¹ IDRA, “*Impunity: Public opinion on the understanding, reasons, and role of institutions*”, 2016.

also issues related the political system, such as judiciary reform, electoral reform, etc. In addition, “other organised interests, mainly trade unions, army officials, or war veterans, also seek to improve their situation through street protests, lobbying the parliament, lobbying for legislation, and awareness campaigns, among other things” (Londo, 2016: 65). So far the impact of civil society in mobilising citizens has been limited¹², but some initiatives have influenced the legislation processes. For example, in 2016, an alliance established to oppose the importing of rubbish into the country succeeded in temporarily halting parliamentary approval of the law. But this was mainly thanks to lobbying and media coverage and not so much due to massive citizen participation.

Finally, there are also protests of a more “spontaneous” nature. These tend to be initiated by citizens who do not necessarily organise themselves in particular groups or associations but are capable of gathering a number of followers in their protests. These protests are usually also joined by existing associations and groups (especially in environmental causes). In addition, political figures and parties also often try to join the protests at some point. In some cases involvement by the opposition contributed to the demanded changes. For example, after seven people affected by flooding but who had not yet been remunerated by the government protested in city of Shkoder in January 2017, their cause was taken up by the opposition in Parliament. Overall, though, protests are perceived to be hijacked by the politicians, and the involvement of political parties in protests has generally sparked protests within the protest in cases when the protest was not politically sponsored. Involvement of politicians is often rejected by the protesters for fears of manipulation and instrumentalisation of the protest. For example, during massive protests against the dismantling of chemical weapons in Albania in 2013, high-ranking officials of the opposition tried to join the protest, but were immediately turned away.

1.3. Case study: Protests against building a playground at Lake Park

The focus of this analysis is on the protests against the construction of a children’s playground in the Grand Park of Tirana, also known as the Lake Park. The transition period is marked by dramatic transformation and urbanisation all across Albania, but nowhere is this transformation more visible than in Tirana. The construction of high rises, built closely, at the expense of public spaces, and especially green areas, has led to a particular irritation and sensitivity of Tirana residents in this aspect. The Lake Park is not only the largest green area within the city limits, but it is also considered to be the last area still protected from development that would damage the natural environment. Given its special status, protests readily started, further motivated by rumours that the playground would not be the only development in the area; rather it would pave the way for further development, such as a restaurant, clubs, apartment towers, and so on. In addition construction of the children’s playground was followed by the government’s unveiling of its urban master plan, which, in its original form, also included a high rise and commercial centre right at the entrance of the park, further fuelling fears that the last

¹² Ibid.

remaining green space in the city was doomed. The announcement of the master plan followed a legal battle launched by the Citizens for the Park (*Qytetaret Per Parkun*) movement in 2015, which had aimed to prevent the construction of blocks of flats on the edge of the lake area. The public's fears that the environment would not be protected were bolstered by the failure of the municipal government to provide clear, transparent and reliable accounts of what the actual plan was, as well as its failure to publish information about the children's playground project.

The protests started in February 2016, and continued intensively for a month or two, but they eventually petered out by the playground's inauguration on 1 June 2016. Initially environmental associations, mainly coming from the Citizens for the Park movement, made up the core of the protesters, who physically clashed with representatives of the construction companies building the playground, pulling down a fence surrounding the work site, and later also scuffling with municipal police. Along with the daily protests against the construction, a group of protesters camped out near the construction site in order to protect the park and prevent further development. Simultaneously, activists filed freedom of information requests with the municipality, demanding information about the construction and environmental permits. Based on the available information, the protesters alleged that the construction process was illegal, as it had no permit and that the environmental status of the Lake Park was violated.

Afterwards, representatives of the student movement joined the protests, and later opposition protests also took on the cause. While the original protesters rejected the presence of the opposition in their protests as well as that of figures connected with the opposition, the opposition organised its own parallel protests for the park, also involving clashes with the police. The battle was also taken to the Parliament in opposition discussions. The Democratic Party of Albania (*Partia Demokratike e Shqipërisë*) also filed suit against the municipality, claiming that the project was not legal. Finally, after several weeks of protests, President Bujar Nishani, who had previously been Albania's minister of the interior and was a member of the opposition, also joined the protests, expressing his support against the playground's construction. The involvement of the opposition in the protests, as well as that of the president's, gave the crisis the notion of a political battle, where the prime minister and government were protecting the municipality, while the opposition inveighed against it.

This research focuses on the Lake Park protests, as one of the most recent examples of protest in Albania. This crisis can be considered relevant also because it is a sort of continuation of previous protests of an environmental nature, which included important similarities; this provides a context that contributes to the analysis of the media coverage of the protest and of citizen engagement. The crisis furthermore involved tenacious disagreements between major social actors since Tirana residents were demanding transparency and accountability from the local government; thus, this analysis is revealing of the dynamics of communication between these two groups. Finally, the protests were heavily politicised, involving the opposition, and the resulting political conflict overshadowed the demands of citizens and civil society. Such hijacking is a

frequent phenomenon in the course of similar crises and protests in the country. Thus, although the analysis is focused on a particular case, it holds many similarities with other similar cases of crisis in the country, and the patterns of media reporting identified are likely to be reproduced in other crises as well.

2. About this research

The methodology used for analysing media coverage of the protest was primarily based on a media content analysis.

For these purposes, a small sample of media was selected, based on their assessed popularity while also aiming to include a variety of media profiles. Given the lack of official data on audience and readership, it is not possible to establish which media are the most popular and with the greatest reach. However, television is perceived to be the most important source of information, followed by online media, as indicated by the “National survey on perceptions and expectations towards a potential EU membership of Albania”, a study commissioned by the EU Delegation to Albania. In addition, most television stations belong to media groups that include different kinds of media, namely TV, radio, print publications, and online news websites, which share resources and reporting, so the same content is available in several forms. In addition, there are four main all-news channels providing 24-hour news broadcasting, also published through their online platforms. With this in mind, it was decided that the analysis would focus on media content in the six main TV stations/ online news media. Top Channel TV and TV Klan are the two national commercial broadcasters, while Vizion Plus TV is one of the main generalist TV stations in the country. The coverage of Ora News TV and ABC News was also included since they rank among the main news channels. Coverage of Shqiptarja.com, an important online platform that also integrates reporting and material from TV station Report TV, as it belongs to the same media group, was also included.¹³ Media outlets are certainly not free from the deep politicisation of Albanian society. “In many cases, it is difficult to tell if a media outlet has produced its own news or has copied it from other media. The differences in news from one media outlet to the next relate more to political slant” (IREX, 2016:11). The media selected tend to support to different degrees either the government – e.g. Top Channel TV, Report TV/Shqiptarja.com – or the opposition – ABC News and (until recently) TV Klan – although they all generally try to appear neutral, and there is no formal editorial policy supporting one political party over another. There is no particular attitude from any of the media vis-à-vis civil society, but when civil society causes are viewed as political ones, the media are divided accordingly.

Given the small sample of this content analysis, the selection focused on two key days of the protest events: 22 February 2016, when the opposition organised its own protest and

¹³ The content of the public broadcaster was not available, which made it impossible to include in the analysis. The same applies to news channel News 24TV and its online website Balkanweb, since content from the period of the protest was not available at the beginning of 2017.

clashed with police, and 6 March 2016, the first major clash of protesters with the police. The sample focused on the main news broadcasts of the day for the generalist TV stations and on the news summaries of the protest events in the news channels, which, while reporting around the clock, also had an end-of-the day report for the protests in question. In total, fourteen news items were analysed, including nine TV news items and five online items. While this analysis is by no means an exhaustive review of all media coverage of this incident, which lasted several months, it aims to analyse some key moments and actors, highlighting the dynamics in media coverage and the factors that influence this coverage. The analysis was mostly based on a frame analysis and a monitoring of the respect for some journalistic norms.

To shed more light on the situation of crisis reporting, five experts from different media fields who were directly involved in covering the protests or analysing them, were interviewed. In addition, the research was coupled with insights from different secondary sources on media and crisis situations.

3. Research findings

The content analysis focused on several variables: the variety of voices presented, the frame in which the problem/crisis was presented, the frame in which the solution/prognosis was presented, the siding of the media with any of the views of the crisis, sensationalist reporting, and discriminatory reporting or presence of hate speech.

3.1 Political actors dominant, pluralism limited

Overall, the results of the analysis indicate that the media did not demonstrate an extreme lack of pluralism, but also that the level of pluralism was far from ideal. Six of the news items only used sources that came from only one group, usually only the municipality, the opposition or the protesters (see Table 1).

Table 1. Level of pluralism in news content

Pluralism of sources about crisis situation	N
There is one source or multiple sources coming from the same interest group (same or affiliated political structures, NGO sector with joint goals, etc.)	6
Sources come from a few relevant sectors/interest groups, but some key perspectives are missing	4
There is an ideal (or close to ideal) plurality of voices, i.e. representatives of all (or nearly all) interest groups relevant to the crisis situation are included	3

Other (only a description of the protests, without quoting protesters or other sources)	1
Total	14

However, this lack of pluralism is mainly because of the technical nature of the news items and news production which is based rather on publishing several items on the same issues than assuring pluralism in a single news piece. Specifically, two TV stations broadcast one news item focusing on the protesters, and then right after, in the same news edition, broadcast a news item covering the municipality's response. The same is true for the news website shqiptarja.com, where two articles were published on the same day, but separately – the first focusing on the opposition view and then on the municipality's response. So in this case this number should be taken with some reservation when forming judgements about pluralism.

Another four news items tended to present both sides of the argument on the crisis but lacked other voices that would give more in-depth information. Typically these news items would focus on the municipality and either the opposition or the protests – the two sides of the protests. What was lacking in every news item was an expert source or, in cases when the main news content was the protesters' clash with the police, it lacked the police statements on the events.

Overall three news items can be considered as close to an ideal plurality of sources, including voices of the protesters (opposition or civil society), municipality/government, police/prosecution, and also citizens opposing the protest. However, even these articles were missing an expert opinion that could shed more light on whether the project was legal, what the effects on the environment were, what further steps should be considered and so on.

The experts interviewed also confirmed the view that there was balanced reporting, but a pluralism of sources was not ultimately achieved. "I believe that the only element missing was a pluralism of sources, since the media focused only on the protesting side and on the municipality, which was under criticism for not properly managing community relations. There have been only press releases from the municipality, but in essence the notifications lacked information and transparency on what would actually happen at the lake park; the dynamics of the decision were not clear and the voice of the community was missing."¹⁴ The media analysis content does not fully coincide with the remark that citizens were not represented, since the voice of protesters was heard in almost all media content covering the clash between protesters and police on 6 March 2016, but the results might have been different if a larger media sample had been analysed. Judging by the overall coverage that followed and the heavy involvement of the opposition and then also the president, it was true that the voices from the political sphere were the most prominent in the communication on the protests, and that the protesters no longer received the same media attention, while the discourse was channelled into the political

¹⁴ Interview with Monika Stafa, 7 February 2017

battle between the government and the opposition. In addition, one of the journalists covering the protests observed that reporters tended to interview the more famous and articulated protesters, rather than simple citizens participating in the protest.¹⁵ Another media expert stated that “there was not much reporting: the reporting was in fact limited to conveying the statements and positions of both sides in the protest”.¹⁶ In other words, conveying statements from opposing sides of the protests was not sufficient to fully present their views. In the analysed sample the media failed to actively seek information and views in order to elaborate and problematise some of the statements of the stakeholders.

Table 2. Dominant and omitted voices in news items

Sector given the dominant voice in the news item	Number of articles	Sector not given a voice, key for understanding	Number of articles
Government/ ruling party	5	Government/ ruling party	2
Opposition	6	Experts	8
Civil society / Protesters	3	Civil society	6
Total	14	Total	16

Note: some of the articles were missing more than one relevant source, and thus the overall No. of articles with missing sources in the table is above 14.

From Table 2 we can see that expert sources are completely missing from the sample, even though in eight of the news items we evaluated their views would have been important to better understand what was going on. For example, one claim of the protesters was that the municipality had acted illegally and had not followed all procedural steps needed to obtain a construction permit for the playground. Since this was a legal issue, interviewing an expert would have provided the public with more reliable and complete information on the situation for deciding whether to side with the government or the protesters. Similarly, a few articles focused on the clash between protesters and the police, leading to physical injuries on both sides, as well as on protesters being detained a few hours at the police station. However, there was no statement from the police on the conduct of events and the clashes, but only a statement from the mayor, who condemned the violence of protesters against municipal police officers and used the opportunity also to discredit the protesters’ cause.

Civil society sources were presented in three news items, but even though they were the initiators of the protests, their voice was missing in six news items where their voice was judged as crucial. Civil society protesters not only initiated the protests when construction first began, but they also resisted attempts to curtail them and went on with the protests for several weeks, presenting their opposition to what they claimed was a harmful and abusive project, as well as demanding greater transparency and accountability from municipal authorities. In a few news items the news focused instead

¹⁵ Interview with Manjola Hasa, 25 January 2017

¹⁶ Interview with Lutfi Dervishi, 16 January 2017

only on reporting the clashes of protesters with the police, and not covering the claims of the protesters against the municipality, namely the reason they were protesting. However, the absence of civil society is particularly visible in news items that focused on the protests of the opposition against the municipality, which means that it does not point to unbalanced reporting, but rather a lack of contextualisation of the protests, pitting one against another – the municipality and the opposition – and focusing on this political battle while neglecting the voices from the community that would provide a wider picture. In words of one news editor interviewed for this research: “Along the course of the protests, reporting shifted to a political attack on the opposition against the mayor, sidestepping the way the decision was made, the project, its implementation, environmental effects, benefits to children, etc. The role of civil society activists, who were the first to spark public reaction, faded away, until it was entirely forgotten, and the strongest memory is that of opposition MPs clashing with the police”¹⁷. One journalist who covered the protests also admits that the media did not focus extensively on the resistance of activists, who camped out in the park for several days: the reporting was occasional, rather than constant.¹⁸

If we look each media outlet, four out of the six media outlets included in the analysis had views of the government present in both news items in the sample (Table 3), while ABC News and Vizion Plus TV used government sources in only one item.

Table 3. Sources used, per media outlet

Media	Government	Opposition	Civil society	Police	Prosecution
ABC News	1	1	1	1	
Shqiptarja.com	2	2	1		
Vizion Plus TV	1	1	1		1
Top Channel TV	2	1	1		
RTV Klan	2	1			
Ora News TV	2	1	1		
Total	10	7	5	1	1

Other sectors were given less prominence, overall.¹⁹ In general, the coverage seems provide minimal pluralism in terms of the three main actors involved in the protests

¹⁷ Interview with Mimoza Kociu, news editor, ABC News TV, 20 January 2017

¹⁸ Interview with Manjola Hasa, 25 January 2017

¹⁹ One should be careful about making conclusions based on this illustrative sample. Possible differences in the way the news was packaged and also in the content available should be considered as well. Vizion Plus

across all media. The only exception is RTV Klan, which is totally missing the voice of protesters in its two news items included in this analysis. In fact, news about the civil society protesters on this television station focused almost exclusively on the way the protest was conducted, the actions of the protesters and the clash with the police. Its reports lacked any statement from civil society protesters or any explanation from the reporter about what their demands and claims were. One should note, however, that these results are not representative of all content published by these media on this subject, and that more pluralism might be achieved by these media throughout the entirety of published items. That the analysed news items of Shqiptarja.com carry all three main voices might have more to do with the format – a summary of the main events of the day in the protest – which in itself enables inclusion of a variety of voices.

3.2. Diagnosing the problem: From protests as threats to public order to questionable governance

The dominant frame identified in the news items analysed is that of public order, related mainly to the impact of the protests on public safety and property, which is found in 22 of the 35 total problems identified in the frame analysis of the media content. Another problem, but a significantly less frequent one, is related to evaluation of the governance, while the least frequent identified diagnosis is related to politicisation of protests.

Table 4. Diagnosis frames

Main frames	N	Sub-frames	N
Public order	22	Violence of protesters	15
		Destruction of public property	6
		Lack of cohesiveness of protesters	1
Governance	9	Bad governance/ environmental protection	4
		Lack of transparency	2
		Questionable legal background of government actions	2
		Good governance	1
Politicisation of protests	4	Instrumentalisation of protests by opposition	2
		Opposition acting against the public interest	2
Total	35	Total	35

Note: “N” in the table refers to the frequency of certain frames, or the number of articles in which each of the frames/subframes occur. Certain articles include more than one frame/subframe, and thus the overall number is higher than the number of news reports analysed.

TV carried two separate stories on one day of the protest, which included one sector for each story, whereas no video content was retrievable from ABC News TV, and one web article was included in the monitoring instead.

When breaking down the main diagnosis frames further, the main subframe of the general frame of **public order** is related to the violence of the protesters: 15 out of 22 frames of public order. This is related to the fact that most of the media reports focused on a description of the events as well as the days selected included episodes of protesters clashing with police. Similarly, the second subframe within the main frame of public order is that of destruction of public property by the protesters (six out of 22 frames related to public order) while there was only one case where a lack of cohesiveness of protesters and interaction with other citizens were cited as one of the problems.

Public order was dominant as the main frame partly due to the coincidence of selected coverage with the protests' violent episodes. The focus on violent episodes was also the main way that the media covered these protests, reflecting the event, but lacking more in-depth reporting or better contextualisation of the protests. In fact, especially regarding the events of 22 February 2016, when protesters attempted to destroy the surroundings of the work site for the children's playground, almost all coverage focused on how the protest turned violent. The dominance of this subframe is further reinforced by statements of the officials, either the mayor of Tirana or his deputy, condemning the violence of the protesters and their clashes with the police, as well as the conduct of protesters who joined the opposition on 6 March 2016, the other day of the monitoring. The same statements also highlighted the protesters' destruction of public property. While the framing of public order in light of protest violence cannot be considered problematic in itself, one can argue that concurrent neglect towards protest ideas and demands show a lack of consideration of the public interest in evaluating the newsworthiness of the protests events.

By contrast, the second main diagnosis frame identified was that of **governance**, in nine out of 35 cases. The most frequent subframe is that of bad governance, coming mainly from statements of civil society protesters as well as those of the opposition. The subframe of bad governance was closely combined with what was framed as a need to protect the environment, which the municipality was guilty of endangering, according to the protesters. Meanwhile the only subframe related to good governance is found in the statements of the municipality, whose representatives claimed they were acting in the public interest when building the playground.

Two other subframes identified within the main frame of governance were that of the lack of transparency on the project of constructing the playground and the questionable legality of the project itself, namely whether the project had a building permit and whether it needed one at all. The last frame found in the diagnosis part of our analysis focused on the politicisation of the protests (four out of 35). This was related to protesters distancing themselves from the opposition, who later also started to protest, joining the protesters on a few occasions, as well as to the direct attack of the municipality on the opposition protests, regarding them as acts of vandalism that hindered the positive development of the city.

3.3 Framing solutions

The other part of the frame analysis – framing of the prognosis/solution – indicate a similar framing patterns. However, rather than a frame of public order, the dominant framing of the prognosis pertains to **governance** (ten out of 19 identified frames) (See Table 4).

Table 5. Framing solutions/prognoses

Prognosis main frames	N	Prognosis sub-frames	N
Public order	7	Protests will intensify	2
		Give up violence for dialogue	5
Governance	8	Environmental destruction	3
		Improvement of recreational spaces	2
		Investigation of authorities	2
		Improvement of transparency	1
Politicisation of protests	3	Protests will not be politicised	1
		Political battle will continue	2
Total	18		18

Several subframes are identified in the sample, depending on who is talking, i.e. whose views are presented. Thus, one of the subframes is related to the concerns that the park will be turned into concrete and the destruction of green space by the municipality due to the ongoing construction (three out of eight subframes on governance). This has been voiced mainly by the protesters, both from civil society and the opposition party. An opposite subframe is related to the claim that the ongoing construction will bring a novelty by building a children’s playground, and there will be increased green spaces for citizens, which clearly comes from the municipality, which was defending its project (two out of eight subframes on governance). The three remaining subframes were related to the investigation launched by the state prosecutor on whether the construction permits were legal and on whether the municipality had followed every step of the procedures, after allegations made by the opposition and civil society activists.

A second major frame in the prognosis analysis is on **public order** (seven out of 18 identified frames). This frame is divided in two subframes, focusing on the course that the protests should take: the intensification and persistence of protesters to protect the park (two out of seven), or the need for protesters to renounce violence and start a dialogue with the municipality (five out of seven). Even in this case it is clear that the protesters state that the intensification of the protests is a solution to protect the park, while municipal officials consider the violence of protests deplorable and suggest dialogue as the only way out without indicating specific solutions that can come out of such dialogue.

The last main frame in the prognosis analysis concerns the politicisation of protests (three out of 18) either by the initiative of the opposition, or by the need of the civil society

protesters to distance themselves from the opposition party, which was also protesting. One of the subframes is also directly related to the transference of the political battle between the government and opposition to the protest (two out of three), while the other subframe is about the determination of the protesters to keep the nature of their protest apolitical and only about the environment (one out of three).

The pairing between diagnosis and prognosis frames shows that there is a relative consistency with regard to the frame of governance and politicisation of protests in terms of solutions provided, and their frequency (See Table 6).

Table 6. Diagnosis/prognosis linkage

Diagnosis main frames	N	Prognosis main frames	N
Public order	22	Public order (intensification of protests / renouncement of violence)	7
Governance	9	Governance (environmental destruction / recreational improvement / improvement of transparency)	8
Politicisation of protests	4	Avoid politicisation / consider protests a political battle	3
Total	35	Total	18

Mainly, in both diagnosis and prognosis, the local governance was presented as either good or bad, depending on who was the dominant source. Protesters claimed that the decisions of the municipality are conducive to the destruction of green spaces and that the government demonstrates a lack of transparency. According to this view the solutions are to halt construction and increase government transparency. On the other hand the municipality claimed that the playground is in the public interest, and so it presented as a solution to continue construction while engaging in dialogue with the protesters.

What is striking is the offered solutions/prognoses were so rarely presented in the frame of public order (seven times), compared to the high number of cases where diagnosis is presented in the frame of public order (22 times). While the framing of problem was determined by a focus on the protest happenings, including clashes with the police, protest demands and solutions were in a way neglected in how the events were framed. Even when reporting on the violence, a solution was implied or noted only rarely, while solutions presented by the protestors (primarily those from civil society), for what they framed as a problem of bad governance, were also mentioned only rarely.

3.4. Who decides what the “problem” is?

In fact, if we look at the sources that spell out the problems in media coverage, it is not the protesters who do most of the talking (Table 7):

Table 7. Actor specifying the problem

Actor specifying the problem	N
Government	11
Opposition	8
Civil society/ protesters	6
Police	1
Prosecution	1
Total	27

The government is in fact the largest category in terms of the source specifying the problem. On the other side, while most references to violence regarded the clashes of civil society with the police, rather than the actions of the opposition, both civil society and the opposition are similarly present in the sample as actors specifying the problem. Since the opposition also constitutes a part of the protesters, in a way the media provided a balance of pro-protests and anti-protests framing of the crisis. However, the focus on the political actors on both sides in effect diverted attention away from citizens' views and demands. The dominance of the political actors is obvious – they frame the problem in 70 per cent of cases in the analysed sample.

If we look at who is causing the problem and who should provide the solution, it is clear that the protesters are presented as the actors who bear the brunt of responsibility in both cases (Table 8, below).

Table 8. Actors identified as cause of problem/responsible for solutions

What causes the problem	N	Who should provide the solution?	N
Local government and/or mayor	7	Local government and/or mayor	3
Protesters/ civil society ²⁰	14	Protesters/ civil society	4
Police	2	Police	1
Opposition ²¹	10	Opposition	4
Total	33	Total	12

Looking at the results of the frame analysis on who or what is causing the problem, it is clear that the protesters, that is the civil society protesters, are presented as the main actors responsible for the “problem” (14 out of 33). The opposition is also viewed as the cause of the problem in ten of the 31 identified cases. Thus, when looking at how the

²⁰ The terms “protesters” and “civil society” are used interchangeably to indicate the protesters who hail mainly from environmentalist groups, as compared to the opposition protests.

²¹ “Opposition” is also meant to include protesters in respect of the political organisation of protesters from the opposition parties in the events of 22 February 2016.

actors responsible for the problem are identified, it becomes even more clear that the media focused primarily on the protest events – including the violent clashes – rather than on the protesters’ view of the local government’s actions, the protesters’ reasons, their demands, and an explanation of their legitimate causes.

This is in line with what all interviewed respondents identified as a stable characteristic of covering the protests: balanced coverage of events, but a failure to engage in in-depth reporting. As one interviewee puts it, “there is no analysis or in-depth reporting. The media provide fragments, but the context is lacking. They are consistent in reporting the different positions taken by each side, but the content is empty and the context is lacking, it is more of a linear reporting. The only difference was made by BIRN, which went beyond this way of reporting and published the municipality’s project documentation.”²²

Table 9. Problems and solutions, per media outlet

		ABC News	Shqipta rja.com	Vizion Plus TV	Top Channel TV	RTV Klan	Ora News TV	Total
Problem	Violence of protesters	2	2	2	3	3	3	15
Solution	Give up violence for dialogue	1	2		1	1		5
Problem	Destruction of public property	1	1	1	1	1	1	6
Problem	Cohesiveness of protesters					1		1
Problem	Bad governance	2	1	1				4
Solution	Government should not build in the park	1	1	1				3
Problem	Lack of transparency		1	1				2
Solution	Intensification of protests	1		1				2
Problem	Politicisation of protests		2					2
Problem	Legality of the building process			2	1			3
Problem	Opposition acting against the public interest		2					2

Note: for most of the problems there is no “solution” pair in the table, since solutions in those cases were not indicated at all in the analysed media items. The number of solutions in this table refers to the stated or implied solutions in the text, whereas the number of prognoses in Tables 5 and 6 refers to the predictions the author of the text or the quoted actor is making regarding the situation, in this case the protest.

The media content analysis showed that the dominant problem across all media was related to the violence of the protests (15 out of 35; two to three per media outlet). The

²² Interview with Lutfi Dervishi, 18 January 2017

solution to the problem framed as giving up violence and engaging in dialogue, which was derived from reports of statements from the municipality, was indicated in four out of six analysed media. The second main problem identified was that of the destruction of public property (six out of 35), mentioned in the coverage of all six media outlets, providing a more or less uniform view. In this case there was no solution identified, as the media merely reported the events, and since the actors that spoke about them (opposition and municipality) only exchanged accusations, without offering solutions, no specific solution or prognosis appeared in the media coverage.

The media content analysis indicated some differences in terms of frames critical towards the government. More specifically, the table shows that only ABC News TV, Shqiptarja.com, and Vizion Plus TV framed the news in the context of bad governance and a lack of transparency, while the two national TV stations and the private RTV Klan did not address this problem. Even the media that did address transparency and governance did not do so through their own reporting and initiatives, but rather by providing more detailed statements of the parties involved – the protesters, opposition, and the municipality. Another major difference can be noted in terms of public interest and the way this is “counteracted” by the opposition, as the municipality claims. This is visible only in the media content of Shqiptarja.com, and that is primarily because they published the whole statement of the municipality against opposition protests.²³ A minor subframe related to the dominant frame of good governance was that of the questions about the legality of the actions and project of the municipality, expressed mainly by the protesters. The table shows that only Vizion Plus TV focused on this, mainly by giving voice to the protesters who expressed this concern.

Table 10. Actors specifying the problem, per media

Media	Government	Opposition	Civil society/protesters	Police/ Prosecution
ABC News TV	1	1	1	1
Shqiptarja.com	2	2	2	
Vizion Plus TV	2	2	1	1
Top Channel TV	2	1	1	
TV Klan	2	1		
Ora News TV	2	1	1	
Total	11	8	6	2

Looking at the actors that specify the problem in each media, there is a relatively consistent pattern and presence of voices: the government has the greatest presence since it is responding to both the civil society protests and opposition ones. The opposition is also heavily present in the news and is specifying the problems, at least in the news items relating to the protests of the opposition. Regarding the civil society protesters, their absence is noticeable only in the TV Klan news items. As mentioned above, while this TV station did cover the protesters’ clash with the police, they provided no footage of

²³ This does not mean that they were biased since in a previous article they also published the full statement of the opposition advisers to the municipality. It is again related more to the technical packaging of the news, rather than an open bias or exclusion of particular actors.

their declaration, requests or reasons why the clash started. While there might be different reasons for this absence, perhaps this case can be illustrative of the trend that some sources of information and some protesters (in this case political ones), might be treated as more important than others. Given the size of the analysed sample, this might be an isolated case and not a common practice, but it still speaks to the limits of coverage in the course of a crisis.

3.5. Media favouritism

Overall, the media did not present any visible favouritism towards one side or the other in any of the news items monitored.

However, one should note that there was a prevailing focus on the protest violence, in all analysed media. At the same time, there were no reports on violent police actions: in fact, in the reports on the opposition protests, it was emphasised that the police did nothing confrontational, which was not the case with the civil society protesters, where the police tried to prevent them from entering the construction site. While such framing was dominant, all media also reported that the civil society protests started peacefully, by giving flowers to the police, and only then did it deteriorate.

In one of the news items there was greater emphasis on the violence of protesters organised by the opposition, but this was mainly because it was longer than the other news items, following the protest events in detail. After the coverage of protest events, there was the statement of the municipality, which was brief. While the news piece was disproportionate in terms of the time devoted to the opposition and municipality, it also reflected the dynamics of events: the protest lasted for several hours, but the municipality only gave a brief statement. In this respect, the news report was a reflection of the events from each side. In another instance, when reporting on the clash of civil society protesters with the police, even though most of the news item was about the violence, the story also started by with images of the protesters presenting the police with flowers as a sign of peace and understanding.

However, in its reporting of the details the media seemed to cast one side or the other in a more favourable light. This was the case when the political actors staged parallel events in order to improve their image and show their commitment to the environment. While the protesters and opposition demanded that the municipality stop construction and publish the park's project documentation, the mayor condemned their violence and, as a side event, planted trees in another area of the park. Similarly, while the protests of the opposition became violent, resulting in property destruction in the park, nearby other members of the opposition planted trees, as a sign of their commitment to the environment. Both episodes were reported in only two of the analysed news items: Top Channel TV, which is known to be closer to the government, covered the mayor planting trees on its news programme, while the opposition planting trees was covered by the other national TV station, TV Klan, which was closer to the previous government (currently the opposition).

Looking at the dominant frames across the media, there are also slight differences. More specifically, the news items analysed from Top Channel, TV Klan, and Ora News TV did not frame the news in terms of bad governance, unlike all other media coverage where this frame is present. Siding with the opposition in the analysed media sample was even less noticeable. The only media depicting the frame of the opposition fighting against the public interest is shqiptarja.com, which published the full statement of the municipality. At the same time, in another article the same website published the full statement of Democratic Party against the municipality, which does not show any open bias. One of the media interviewees, however, indicated that the differences were in fact more prominent: “Media closer to the government treated the protests as illegal, against the public interest and focused more on statements of the municipality. Other media known to be against the government, focused more on the protests and on police violence, and for these media the municipality was against the public interest.”²⁴ Other interviewees also suggested that the editorial policies of media outlets in fact make significant difference in how the protest or other crisis situations are covered. One expert noted, “there is a difference in media coverage from one media to the next, and in some cases the reporting has been biased. Also, sometimes a protest lasts four hours, and one media devotes 50 seconds to it, while the other broadcasts live all of it; it all depends on the political leanings of the media.”²⁵ Another pointed out that no media is immune to politicisation: “The common denominator of the media coverage is its politicisation. We are in a situation where you cannot find a television [station] that is critical of the mayor of Tirana, which shows that media owners have specific interests that are untouchable. At a time when BIRN, which is donor-funded, has no problem reporting on this issue, other media clearly do, which proves that there are specific links that hinder reporting.”²⁶

Similar as in previous research on another case of protests – these against plans to dismantle chemical weapons on Albanian territory (see Londo 2016) – in this small-scale research there was no indication of obvious siding of the media outlet. However, the above-mentioned coverage of side-events and slight differences in framing, might be indicative of some editorial bias. But in any case, the very focus on protest events and protest violence in particular in all analysed media, coupled with the dominance of political elites as sources, can in itself be considered problematic since it limits reporting on protest demands and is not substantially conducive to the public interest.

3.6. Sensationalist reporting and lack of in-depth information

Most of the analysed reporting was neutral, with no specific tendencies to cater to sensationalism. As Table 8 shows, 11 out of 14 news items did not show any sign of sensationalist reporting.

²⁴ Interview with Monika Stafa, 7 February 2017

²⁵ Interview with Manjola Hasa, 25 January 2017

²⁶ Interview with Lutfi Dervishi, 16 January 2017

Table 11. Sensationalistic reporting

	N
Overhyped, emotional impressions on events	1
Biased representation of crisis with key information necessary for understanding of the crisis missing	2
No sensationalism	11
Total	14

Only three news items had signs of sensationalism. More specifically, one news item, broadcast by Top Channel TV, a national TV station which tends to favour the government, overemphasised the damage made to public property, as well as the violence of the opposition protesters, which was in line with the attitude of the municipality, whose officials presented the opposition protesters as vandals and destroyers of public property. For example, the reporter used emphatic sentences to describe the events: “Violence on Sunday, and violence on Monday”, stressing the violent actions of the protest. Or, “eggs, tomatoes, leeks, and black ink, these were the consequences of the protest called by Democratic Party on the facade of city hall, once renovated by the very leader of the Democratic Party, when he was mayor of Tirana”. The other two news items, one from TV Klan, and the other from Ora News TV, both published on 6 March 2016, presented a slightly biased report of the crisis, missing key information about the protesters’ reasons and missing statements and requests by protesters. The TV Klan news piece explained that “protesters also clashed with other citizens present in the park, who were for the children’s playground”, and said that “the protest deteriorated into violence”, but failed to explain or provide any statement of the protesters themselves, or to provide information about the reason for their protesting. Similarly, a report on the same day from Ora News TV said that “the protest started peacefully, with protesters giving flowers to police women, but soon their plan of work changed dramatically”. The report was limited to only the clashes with police, focusing on the protest’s violence, but the statements of the protesters and their claims that the project was illegal and non-transparent were not presented.

What made these news items sensationalistic was their focus on the violence, and the favourable treatment of official sources; protesters were portrayed mainly in their violent clashes with the police and not for the reasons that led to the violence, while the statement of the mayor of Tirana, in which he denounced the role of the protesters – blaming them for the protests and for injuring a policeman, was heavily reported. Most media coverage ended with the mayor’s statement, without providing responses from protesters (except for one of the media outlets included in the monitoring, shqiptarja.com, which also included one of the protester’s response to the mayor), and without supplying further in-depth information that would shed more light on the municipality’s governance and claims of both the protesters and the municipality.

This lack of in-depth information was identified as one of the main problems across the media sample. For example, key insights into the legality of the constructions and possible consequences for the media community were largely missing. One interviewee

noted that the reporting in the media only conveyed speculations and fears of the protesters, or the response of the municipality. “In this case the public never learnt the true causes of the protest or the nature of the project. Whoever reported that towers would be built never publicly apologised, or, if information was hidden, the media should have said that the municipality did not provide the information. In this context, the media misinformed the public and no one took responsibility for that.”²⁷

3.7. Hate speech and discriminatory reporting

There was no discriminatory reporting or hate speech identified during the monitoring. Groups marginalised for their ethnic or religious origin, gender or sexual orientation or any other protected category, were in no way mentioned in the narratives of political elites or in the media reports.

However, a few of the statements made by representatives of the opposition or the municipality might be regarded as problematic and involved strong language. The media simply transmitted these statements and did not clearly position towards any of them. For example, after the clashes between the protesters and the police, which led to the wounding of a policeman, the mayor issued a questionably discriminatory and defamatory statement vis-à-vis protesters, which broadcast by Ora News TV: “This is a cause put forth by a group of losers, a group of people sick with delirium, who have done nothing in their life but struggle to appear on TV, following some political party, or supporting a cause that is not valid. My question to them is, how can they have a valid cause, saying that we do not want you to touch our trees, when they then go and attack people?” TV Klan and Top Channel TV chose to quote another part of the mayor’s statement: “Today we witnessed how a protest that could really be a civil society protest degenerate into violence, while there was no need to turn it into the protest of a violent society. I do not believe they feel good about what they did. I come from civil society myself. Tani, whom they hurt today, comes from civil society. None of us has ever used violence to advance our cause.” Shqiptarja.com broadcast the full video statement of the mayor, in which he said, among other things, “if someone is ready to assault another civil society activist wearing a municipal police uniform, on a Sunday, when everyone else wants to rest and enjoy their day off, when Tani and 300 other municipal police officers should have enjoyed their day off, the use of violence totally discredited this cause. The use of violence today discredited the cause that I’ve been talking about for a week.” While Shqiptarja.com included in the coverage the mayor’s full statement²⁸, it was also the only media outlet that broadcast the statement of one of the protesters when he was freed from police headquarters, responding to the mayor’s charges of violence by the protesters.

²⁷ Interview with Aleksander Cipa, 30 January 2017

²⁸ Other stations might have also included it, but not all video clips and coverage were available at this time.

4. The role of regulatory and self-regulatory bodies

Media coverage of the protests took place before the Council of Complaints became functional, and self-regulation in the media is still not implemented. Hence, the media content considered for this research was not subjected to the regulator, or to self-regulation. Even after its formation, the Council of Complaints has not been involved in protests or crisis situations, through statements or public debates on journalistic norms, while no self-regulatory body as yet exists.

However, in this case the analysis of media content of the Lake Park protests and the information from the interviews with experts indicates that there were no breaches of basic journalism standards, but that the coverage presented problems in terms of pluralism of voices and depth of information provided. The media failed to present a proper context for the protests and in particular, to insist on transparency of the project, instead focusing on the violent protests and political battle, rather than the issues of good governance and the public interest.

There is an overall lack of action at the level of the professional community to promote journalistic standards. There is an overall scepticism among journalists with regard to collective organising. “Frequently faced with a lack of enthusiasm and lack of funding, these associations have not managed to have a lasting impact or to serve as examples of professional organising. In fact, most journalists interviewed were sceptical about the role and efficacy of such associations. Interviews with journalists indicated that the credibility of associations has been damaged, and there is no coordination or professional solidarity among journalists” (Londo, 2014, 99).

This situation has also taken its toll on self-regulation. While the Code of Ethics was first drafted in 1996 by the Albanian Media Institute, in cooperation with the main journalists associations at the time, to this day no media outlet has adopted it. Media outlets have also not managed to adopt internal self-regulatory guidelines or mechanisms. The only exception is the Free and Fair Media Group, owner of the newspaper and website *shqiptarja.com* and news channel Report TV, which has a detailed code, but no implementing mechanism; in late 2016 the public broadcaster also adopted editorial guidelines.

In the broadcasting sector, the Council of Complaints, within the Audiovisual Media Authority (AMA)²⁹ has a duty to observe the implementation of codes and regulations approved by the AMA that are related to respecting human dignity, especially that of minors, the right to information, and raising awareness of public opinion for respecting moral and ethical norms in the media.³⁰ The Council is in charge of examining complaints

²⁹ Composed of the chairperson and two members who are media experts, appointed for a three-year term, and renewable once; source: Law on Audiovisual Media, Art. 20.

³⁰ Ibid.

coming from the public with regard to audiovisual media content.³¹ The Council's role is to propose respective measures to the AMA Board in the event of a breach of ethics, including written statements and notes on media conduct, as well as fines of up to ALL 300,000 (approx. EUR 2,200) if a media outlet does not respect the right to reply.

Previously, before the new law on audiovisual media was approved, the regulator was called the National Council of Radio and Television, and a body known as the Council of Ethics functioned within the framework of the regulator, but with no full-time employees, as is the case now. The predecessor of the Council of Complaints was more of an honorary and advisory body. While the public could file complaints, the Council of Ethics could issue statements but lacked the power to mediate between the media and the public.

However the members and the chairperson of the current Council of Complaints were appointed for the first time in April 2016. Due to the highly debated and politically blocked process of filling vacancies on the AMA Board, the council was formed three years after adoption of the Law on Audiovisual Media. By that time the protests were well under way, having started in February 2016. Because of this, the newly appointed Council of Complaints was not involved in any way in public complaints on the media's coverage of the protests³², nor have there been any complaints afterwards about the media's coverage of other protests and similar cases of crisis reporting.³³ The current Council of Complaints as well as the previous Council of Ethics have received no complaints about the media's coverage of the protests and have had no regulating role in this respect.

This can be explained in part by the seemingly widespread tendency of citizens to take matters to the media directly, especially on websites and online forums.³⁴ Similarly, an earlier initiative to establish a readers' advocate in several media outlets was used rarely by the readers, who preferred to engage in direct conversation, smear campaigns, or slandering of the author of the articles, rather than to complain to the readers' advocate about the matter.³⁵ Another explanation might also be the novelty of the Council of Complaints, which still has to become better known and more familiar to the public.

Following this tendency, perhaps it will be some time before the Council of Complaints achieves its role as a credible, effective and reliable body for the public to complain about media violations of professional norms and ethics. As the chair of the Council noted, "the

³¹ The written complaint should be about an issue that is no older than 30 days, and the Council can decide to also hear the media outlet on the same issue, collecting the media's claims as well. *Ibid.*, Art. 52.

³² Interview with Monika Stafa, 7 February 2017

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Comments from editors of online media in the Round Table on Online Media, Tirana, May 2015

³⁵ Comments from editors of online media in the Round Table on Online Media, Tirana, May 2015

role of the Council of Complaints can be, and should be, important in improving the quality of reporting, and not just in cases of protests”.³⁶

5. Media stumbling blocks: From weak editorial independence to non-transparent state institutions

In a broader sense, media coverage is affected by systemic conditions resulting in a subjugation of professional interests to commercial interests. Namely, the **interests of media owners prevail heavily over professionalism**. A 2016 study on the role of editors in Albanian media quoted an editor saying, “the editor is no longer the captain of the ship. The owners have assigned him to the ship’s mast, and the editor screams in vain, because the owner is behind the steering wheel, the owner is the captain” (Londo, 2016: 5). While vested interests of media owners are present in all media coverage, they can be even more visible in media reporting on crises and protests, particularly when the crisis involves political parties. Given the political and economic interests of the media owners, their primary interest is often not quality of reporting, but making sure that these vested interests are not hindered and can flourish even further. “Media owners often exert pressure to ensure that their editorial policies are in line with their political and economic interests.”³⁷

In fact, **weak editorial independence**, often resulting in **self-censorship**, was frequently cited by the interviewees of this research as one of the main factors affecting crisis reporting. “Political bias that the media almost always carry unavoidably affects the editorial line of the media outlet.”³⁸ According to another respondent, “the current media system and the way the media works leads to a total absence of editorial independence”.³⁹ A survey on journalist self-censorship revealed that 73 per cent of respondents believed that Albanian journalists would avoid covering news that was not in line with the interests of their media outlet, while the personal experience of media employees participating in the survey was that 48 per cent of them had avoided covering certain news events frequently or several times (BIRN, 2016:27).

Lack of in-depth and specialised reporting was visible in reporting on the Lake Park protests, as the reports failed to provide some significant information of public interest, instead remaining mostly entangled in the political battle. One of the main limitations in this case was that the **political actors monopolised the protests**, and the media quickly followed suit: even though civil society actors started the protest and resisted for a long time, the main media coverage focused on the political battle and exchanges between the two main political camps. In return, the demands of protesters and citizens were no

³⁶ Interview with Monika Stafa, 7 February 2017

³⁷ IREX, *Media Sustainability Index*, 2015

³⁸ Interview with Monika Stafa, 7 February 2017

³⁹ Interview with Aleksander Cipa, 30 January 2017

longer the primary focus, indicating the complete dependence of media coverage on the political actors. This flaw in reporting is a mere reflection of the public discourse trends in the country, where almost every cell of public life has been politicised or tends to be aligned with some political factor.

However, part of the explanation also lies with the trends in journalism in Albanian media, where the media mostly only convey opinions and concerns of the parties involved. This was the case with the Lake Park protests, where the dominant opinions were conveyed, but they were not questioned, nor did the media seem to have demanded or managed to supply more information on the project and the protests. In fact, one of the major concerns with journalism today is its passive status, with media usually limiting itself to providing statements from all sides involved and calling it a day. Inevitably, the picture provided is a limited one, framed through the dominant voices, and lacking a contextualised overview of the problem.

In such context, substantial pluralism was not achieved. The media overly relied on the perspectives of political elites (both the ruling party and opposition), while some perspectives were neglected. A major absence in terms of pluralism of sources in the case of the Lake Park protests was the lack of expert views, which was unusual, as the Albanian media generally try to provide expert opinions almost on a regular basis. Perhaps one explanation might be the fact that the municipality lacked transparency on the project, and in this context the experts could adequately evaluate its validity or effects.

All of these reasons, along with a perceived degradation of the profession of journalist, have led to a situation where it is difficult for journalists and the media to adopt a **self-regulatory mechanism**, or at least to formally commit to the existing Code of Ethics. Such absence is a manifestation of a divided community, where the media fail to join forces in order to improve their professionalism. At the same time, while media ethics is a part of public debates, it is usually on an *ad hoc* basis, rather than a continuous process, where media professionals would be active and participate with concrete initiatives. This is another factor that might contribute to the **neglect of journalistic ethics** and public interest in media practices.

Media outlets rarely guide their operations in a direction that nurtures a public interest role. While there are Albanian journalists who have focused their work on one specific area over the years, niche reporting remains a luxury. This is because of work overload for journalists, who are unable to focus in-depth on one particular area for an extended time. In fact, even in the monitoring these protests, it was found that most media outlets do not offer continuous in-house or other opportunities for mid-career **training for journalists**, and do not prioritise such opportunities for journalists, even when they are offered by specific organisations. Given the shortage of staff and work overload, these trainings are often not seen as an additional benefit, but rather are considered as a hindrance to journalists' work. In addition, some editors also indicate their dissatisfaction with the skills learned by journalism students and their applicability to the job. "In fact, media editors have continuously pointed out that formal education should shift towards greater practice, rather than the prevalence of theoretical concepts" (Londo, 2016: 6).

Apart from formal education, other organisations, mainly the Albanian Media Institute, have focused on skills-oriented training, as well as topical or niche reporting training for students of journalism and mid-career journalists, recently focusing in particular on the digital skills journalists need for their profession. Perhaps the training needs of the moment should return to the roots of the profession, focusing more on professional skills, starting with the basics of news reporting to the different types of journalism, combined with the skills needed to adapt to the changes in the profession.

Apart from the problems of the media system itself, institutions also have a negative influence on media coverage of crisis, including protests. All respondents indicated the **lack of transparency of institutions** as a persistent problem. “Official institutions are generally not open and transparent. Even in the case of the protest, the municipality gave some information only after confusion had fully set in; it was not open from the beginning, and the project had not been disclosed.”⁴⁰ Another respondent also shared the same view, adding that media get by with easy alternatives: “For example, for the Lake Park protests, there was no publication of the project dossier; only sporadic materials and decisions that appeared in accordance with the charges of the opposition against the municipality. Institutions no longer consider transparency an obligation, and unfortunately the media are getting used to this situation, and often replace official information with informal information.”⁴¹

In line with the lack of transparency of institutions, the problem of **government and political parties preparing footage** for media to broadcast or airing live their activities for the media to report has become a concerning phenomenon. There is a tendency for public institutions to offer ready-made stories to the media, prepared by PR offices, while in-the-field reporting has become more rare.⁴² This has led to a situation where “institutions report themselves all the time; the media just broadcast these reports”⁴³. This is especially sensitive during electoral campaigns, where “...some editors also reported that the political parties had refused to allow TV cameras inside their rallies, leaving the TV stations with no choice but to broadcast what the party had sent, as footage engineered by the party itself, and not by an independent camera” (Londo, 2016:12). As one respondent said, “this subjugation of the media is irreparable damage to the journalists, as it totally demotivates them”⁴⁴. We cannot confirm such practices in the case of the Lake Park protests, since the media did not report any problems in covering

⁴⁰ Interview with Manjola Hasa, 25 January 2017

⁴¹ Interview with Mimoza Kociu, 20 January 2017

⁴² Interview with Monika Stafa, 7 February 2017

⁴³ Interview with Lutfi Dervishi, 16 January 2017

⁴⁴ Interview with Mimoza Kociu

the municipality or other officials, but at the same time there was no direct reporting or interviewing of officials during the protests, only coverage of the statements they made.⁴⁵

Finally, the **lack of organisation and coherence among protest organisers** was an additional problem. This was especially identified by the journalists covering the protests. “The protesters are not always clear or united in what they say. The lack of clarity tends to become even more pronounced during conflicts and clashes.”⁴⁶ In the case of the Lake Park protests, there was a certain level of organisation and articulation from the protesters, since they had had experience with previous protests against the construction of blocks of flats near the lake. In addition, some of their representatives were well-known environmentalists and protesters, experienced in communicating with the media. However, it is also true that the protesters were a mixed group, as the original Citizens for the Park movement was joined later by the student movement, other environmentalists and protesters, which might have contributed to a more unclear presence in the media.

Nevertheless, the main reason the media stopped focusing so much on the protesters was related to the politicisation of the battle, in which media failed to provide the necessary distance.⁴⁷

6. Conclusions

In their coverage of the crisis the analysed media outlets tried to include all actors concerned; the reporting was generally balanced and included different views of the protests.

However, the media reports failed to go beyond a battle of statements from the different sides. There was no in-depth reporting to discover the causes of the protests, the responsibility and role of officials in the protests, or to enlighten citizens about the legality of the project, the environmental impact or the opposition’s reasons for joining the protests. The absence of expert sources in the news items also contributed a type of reporting that conveys only information on the development of events, without contextualising them and providing background information. Even though the preservation of green spaces and recreational spaces in the city is paramount and protecting them is a matter of high public interest, the media reporting did not actively follow this angle, instead reporting on it from the viewpoint of the protesters, the government, or the opposition. Thus, the media limited their role to providing views of both the opposition and the government, acting more as a platform for political exchange, rather than providing actual information for residents concerned about their park.

⁴⁵ The TV debates and current affairs programmes involved both protesters and municipal officials, but news reporting was limited to only official statements and quotes from protesters, be it from the opposition or civil society. At the same time, the media limited its news reporting to the protest events, failing to insist on transparency of the municipality regarding the project.

⁴⁶ Interview with Manjola Hasa, 25 January 2017

⁴⁷ Interviews with respondents

Concerns of civil society protesters and environmentalists were also communicated, but in a few cases the views of protesters were lacking and the focus was on their violence, instead. In fact, the violence of the protests dominated coverage instead of the media trying to seek answers and explanations to what was happening in the park. In addition, insights from the expert interviewees echoed the concerns that the coverage of protests is not necessarily guided by the public interest, but rather by the interests of the media owners. Such influence was indicated in previous research in which it was noted that “the media business and vested interests will have the final word in how protests are covered” (Londo, 2016: 101).

The content analysis did not confirm this obvious bias, and the tone of the protest coverage used in this media analysis was generally neutral, but in a few isolated cases media reports tended to cast a specific actor in a more favourable light, usually being either the government, or the opposition. However, the reporting did not openly discriminate against any of the actors involved, and the language did not go beyond the legal and ethical minimum.

The media content analysis did not point to any visible and notable differences between media outlets. The only differences in the analysed media sample were related to an absence of protesters voices in the reports of one TV station, as well as a limited or absent frame related to bad governance in the reporting of three TV stations. One should again note that the sample was small and that observing the entire coverage of the protests across several months would perhaps arrive at different results.

However, all respondents indicated that the media currently operate with a significant deficit of editorial independence, and it rarely happens that the media does not take political sides, which inevitably affects the space devoted to protests and the angle of reporting. The editorial line of each media outlet greatly affects the space that is given to coverage of protest and the tone used. In general, the siding of the media is the most visible particularly in situations of crisis which involve social controversies and clashes between different political camps. The dominance of the interests of owners is supported by structural factors, where the appointments of editors, ownership and funding patterns are often instrumentalised, and also by the lack of organised advocacy or dedication of a particular media outlet to public interests. Consequently, the media do not invest in journalist education, and journalists are not always able to benefit from opportunities provided for training and specialisation to cover specific topics, mainly because of their heavy workload.

Two other factors outside the media system also partially determine the reporting of similar crisis situations: the low transparency of public institutions or the selective information they provide and the confusion and occasional lack of coherence in protesters’ messages.

Overall, the analysed sample media did not indicate breaches of minimum professional standards, but a dearth of important information, extensive reliance on statements of political elites, a lack of critical distance and sometimes a lack of key perspectives. This

all speaks to the need to advance the role of the media in general and in particular in situations such as citizen protests.

7. Alternatives and recommendations

Coverage of protests is not a particular genre, but a part of media coverage that, due to the reporting of tense situations, tends to be more sensitive at times. However, the shortcomings in this coverage are the same that affect the quality of reporting across all events and phenomena in the media.

The media, editors and journalists, have a responsibility towards the public, which is particularly evident in cases of crisis. This responsibility would be addressed if the media committed to investigating the causes of a crisis – in this case the protests, providing information on the dynamics and interests of the main actors involved and in-depth information necessary for citizens to understand the related issues and perhaps to engage in resolving the related problems. As one of the interviewees pointed out, “reporting should be based on documents, and all sides of the protest should be included, citizens, environmentalists, and the municipality. The media should have paid great attention to the transparency of the project and the financing of the project. If half of the attention paid to cover the hysteria of the protests went to covering the project itself, it would have been a very good thing.”⁴⁸

The media, i.e. their editors and journalists, should urgently restore its watchdog role, putting the actions and claims of authorities under public scrutiny. As one interviewee noted, “we should go back to the journalism that seeks accountability. We should not wait for politicians to speak when they decide; we should insist that they give explanations to the public about their actions, as they have an obligation to do so. This is the only way the media can regain its watchdog role. It is not easy at all, but if there is a consensus among journalists, it would not be impossible.”⁴⁹

The ultimate ideal scenario for covering the protest, though, is greater editorial freedom. “Editorial decision-making at this point is no longer up to the editors or directors of information, but decisions are made from administrators and owners, which produces a huge conflict of interest.”⁵⁰ Thus, systemic changes are necessary to enable editorial independence. These changes can include guaranteeing labour protections for media employees from state institutions and other organisations, the media community promoting merit-based recruitment, initiatives from different actors promoting greater transparency in the media system, such as ownership, funding, influence on editorial policies, promoting further training and specialisation of journalists, etc.

⁴⁸ Interview with Lutfi Dervishi, 16 January 2017

⁴⁹ Interview with Mimoza Kociu, 20 January 2017

⁵⁰ Interview with Aleksander Cipa, 30 January 2017

A few respondents also agreed that media outlets, editors and journalists should employ an ideal scheme for reporting based on expert opinions, the absence of which was noted as one of the main weaknesses of reporting on the Lake Park protests.⁵¹

By contrast, the voices of political parties and politicians should be made less dominant. In cases of crisis such as protests, journalists and editors should not allow politicians to hijack the protests and shift the media's attention away from civil society protestors. As one respondent noted, "I believe we should break the taboos: politicians are not the most powerful, the wisest or unmistakable people in this country, and, we, as the media, have unfortunately allowed them to appear so. In the case of protest at the Lake Park or in other cases, we should provide more space to experts in the area, allowing the public to be properly informed."⁵²

In sum, considering that most of the problems in media coverage come from the way the media system functions, recommendations to improve the situation have to include changes to the whole media system, which is also closely related to the political system and social context. Some specific recommendations should include:

- The regulator and civil society organisations should provide necessary training programmes and enable platforms for professional reporting, including those on niche reporting and investigative reporting.
- Media outlets should turn to experts for information and elaboration of complex issues.
- The community of journalists, led by journalists associations, should promote ethical norms in journalism and fight against the tendency to not separate news from opinion or news from gossip.
- Journalists associations, media outlets and civil society should encourage self-regulatory processes in the media and enable continuous professional debate on media ethics.
- Journalism faculties should include an obligatory internship period for students in the media, in order to give them a practical sense of how media newsrooms function in reality.
- Civil society organisations, state institutions and professional organisations should provide training for journalists; such trainings should include, among other things, familiarisation with the communication practices of state institutions, exercises in critically reviewing particular statements and actively asking for additional explanations, familiarisation with the principles of substantial pluralism, as well as an overall review on how the public interest role is best

⁵¹ Interview with Monika Stafa, 7 February 2017

⁵² Interview with Mimoza Kociu

- served in situations of crisis. Best practices can be presented to concretise the general principle.
- Regulatory institutions, journalists associations and civil society organisations should join forces in initiatives that promote greater transparency of institutions.
 - The regulator, civil society organisations and journalists associations should lobby for a better enforcement of labour rights in the media system and for structural conditions (mainly concerning ownership, financing and appointments) that would enable more editorial independence.

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