



Guidelines on Ethical and Professional Media Election Reporting in Albania

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Media Election Reporting
in Albania**

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ISBN 978-9928-395-07-8

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2023

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FOREWORD AND METHODOLOGY

Any democratic process must allow for freedom of speech and the press, and media coverage of election campaigns is a crucial component of electoral transparency. This guide offers a clear description of the media's actions throughout election seasons. Here, one can find a set of recommendations for how public and private media outlets should cover elections, with the goal not to present a comprehensive set of rules and practices, but rather to draw attention to some shared values that are crucial for media professionals to consider while covering an electoral process from the perspective of the media.

Representative democracy depends on free, fair, and transparent elections. A representative democracy requires knowledgeable citizenry. As such, voting goes beyond simply casting a vote. Election outcomes depend on voter access to information on voting's procedural, institutional, and logistical aspects, as well as public awareness of candidates and their programs. Free and impartial media can be an ally of democratic institutions and democratization processes. This presupposes they can perform their responsibilities professionally, understand their civic and ethical duties, and have acquired the requisite training.

These **Guidelines on Ethical and Professional Media Election Reporting in Albania** are designed to help Albanian journalists cover national and local elections through non biased means. It addresses all areas of quality election coverage for print, web, radio, TV, news agencies, and both public and privately-owned media. It attempts to enhance journalistic abilities while covering election-related topics. The Guidelines aims to strengthen media's freedom to safeguard the citizens' right to information, especially during election processes. This OSCE Presence in Albania-sponsored Guide is for media practitioners, independent broadcasting authorities, and freelance journalists.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS/ABBREVIATIONS

- **CEC** - Central Election Commission
- **UNDHR** - Universal Declaration of Human Rights
- **ECHR** - European Convention of Human Rights
- **CoE** – Council of Europe
- **OSCE** - Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
- **ODIHR** – OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights
- **EMB** - Election management Body
- **AMA** - Audiovisual Media Authority (Autoriteti i Mediave Audiovizive)
- **EAZ** - Electoral Administration Zone
- **CEAZ** - Commission of the Electoral Administration Zone
- **VCC** - Voting Center Commission
- **PBS** - Public Broadcasting Service
- **PACE** – Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

1. ELECTIONS AND ACTORS

Freedom of expression and journalism that provides information to the public serve as the cornerstones of the foundations of democracy. The right to information and expression includes the freedom to seek, receive, and share information. Freedom of expression is an “*enabling right*” that promotes assembly and association. These are important for a pluralistic democracy, and for free and fair elections.

Every election demands media coverage. The media should enlighten voters about their rights, monitor the electoral process, and publish the outcomes. They must also report on incumbents’ performance, host candidate debates, allow candidates to communicate with voters, and track campaign developments.

When studying how the media work during elections, it is important to consider both their variety and autonomy.

1.1 The Rights of Voters

All information for voters must be provided in a timely and understandable manner. Voters’ right to make an informed decision means the media must neutrally and truthfully report on candidates’ and parties’ ideas and stances. Such reporting must be unbiased and impartial, giving all electoral subjects media access on par with their representation in parliament.¹ The media must also report on election-related activities, such as the vote count and election outcomes. Voters should be informed on how to vote by audiovisual or printed media, or by voice and images over the Internet.

1.2 The Rights of Electoral Subjects

Parties and politicians have the right to express their ideology and platforms. Politicians need the media to inform voters of their positions on important issues. Candidates should have equal media access and equal opportunities to inform voters about their plans. Candidates can access the media in many ways. Candidates have the right to reply quickly to inaccurate or offensive statements or regarding their media coverage.

However, political parties and candidates should not abuse their access to the media. Politicians’ media access should not limit journalists’ free speech and objective coverage of facts. Candidates and parties must follow standards to ensure media freedom. They must obey campaign and media guidelines, notably during media-silence/blackout periods, and not pressure media outlets’ editorial policy.

¹ See Law No. 10 019, dated 29.12.2008 “Electoral Code of the Republic of Albania”, Article 81, News of public radio and television (Tirana, 2008).

1.3 Domestic Actors during the Electoral Process and their Role

Democratic elections and democracies itself are impossible to maintain in the absence of a respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, in particular the freedom of expression and the freedom of the media.

To engage in democratic decision-making, the public must be well-informed. During the election campaign and process, it is the media's crucial role to inform citizens about candidates, political parties, and coalitions so they may cast an informed vote. To be democratic, elections must offer voters access to facts.

"Stakeholders" of the process are citizens, informal groups, and organizations with an interest in electoral campaigns and democratic institutions. Primary stakeholders affect or are affected by the Election Management Bodies' (EMB's) actions, policies, and practices; secondary stakeholders have a looser connection to the process and indirectly affect or are affected by the latter.

EMBs – Election Management Bodies

Due to the complexity and specialized expertise required for electoral management, an institution or institutions must be in charge of electoral activities. The Election Commission, Department of Elections, Electoral Council, Election Unit, and Electoral Board are only a few examples of the various shapes and sizes of these organizations.

An EMB is an organization or body whose sole purpose and legal responsibility is to manage some or all of the fundamental elements for the conduct of elections and direct democracy instruments, such as referendums, citizens' initiatives, if they are part of the legal framework. These important (or fundamental) components include:

- determining who is eligible to vote;
- receiving and validating the nominations of electoral participants (for elections, political parties and/or candidates);
- conducting polling;
- counting the votes;
- tabulating the votes etc.

An EMB may be a stand-alone institution or a different management unit inside a bigger organization with non-electoral responsibilities. In Albania, the Central Election Commission is the sole EMB.²

2 *Ibid*, Article 12, Composition and operation of the CEC.

The Central Election Commission (CEC), is an independent institution comprised of three main branches:

1) State Election Commissioner

The State Commissioner of Elections (Commissioner) is a monocratic body that exercises executive powers, directs the administration of the CEC and represents the CEC in relations with third parties, with the following main powers:

- manages the institution and represents it in relations with third parties;
- directs and supervises, directly or through the administration of the CEC, the activity of the electoral administration during the elections and referenda;
- sets the Regulatory Commission (Regulator) and the Complaints and Sanctions Commission (KAS) in motion whenever issues of their competence are presented, prepares meetings and sessions, as well as takes care of clarification and publication of acts;
- takes care of the implementation of the Electoral Code in a fair, precise, accurate and uniform manner by all institutions, entities or persons charged with duties and obligations, according to the law;
- organizes and administers the election processes of institutions and public bodies, when the law charges him with this duty.

2) The Complaints and Sanctions Commission (KAS)

KAS is the competent body for examining administrative complaints and imposing sanctions for violations of the electoral law. KAS operates on a part-time basis and exercises its activity in public hearings of administrative review, which are called by the Commissioner, with the participation of interested parties. It has a prerogative in deciding to declare the elections invalid in one or more voting centers, in one or more electoral zones or in the whole country, as well as for the partial or complete repetition of elections in case of violation of the law; it examines and resolves administrative complaints against the Commissioner's acts and decisions of the CEC administration during the elections, etc.

3) The Regulatory Commission (the Regulator)

The Regulator is the competent body for approving acts with a normative character in the field of elections and establishing rules for elections. The regulator works part-time and exercises its activity in public meetings, which are called by the Commissioner. In the event that the Commissioner does not set the Regulator in motion when there are issues within their competence, then the bodies shall meet on their own at the request of each member.

4) Electoral Administration Zones / Commission of Electoral Administration Zones (EAZs/CEAZs)

Electoral Administration Zones (EAZ) are established and utilized for all types of elections and referenda. The territorial authority of the EAZ is, in general, identical to the administrative territory of the municipality. The CEC divides municipalities containing more than 80,000 eligible voters into many EAZs. In Tirana Municipality,

which is different from other municipalities, each administrative unit constitutes a separate electoral administration zone. The CEC approves division of EAZs no later than nine months before the end of the Assembly's mandate, depending on the number of citizens having the right to vote on the last day of the electoral period for scheduling elections.³ The Commission of Electoral Administration Zones (CEAZ) is responsible for the administration and conduct of elections in the EAZ in accordance with the requirements of the law and the CEC's bylaws.

If the need arises for media to contact representatives of the CEC on election related issues, the primary point of contact will be the media representative(s) of the institution. CEAZs and VCCs do not communicate officially/directly with media representatives, unless authorized to do so by the CEC on providing specific information pertaining to legal technical procedures.

At the same time, journalists are allowed to access voting centers and vote counting centers, following an official accreditation process as observers from the media, administered near the CEC offices prior to election day.

5) Voting Center/Voting Center Commission (VCC)

VCCs are established and function for all types of elections. The VCC is comprised of seven members, one of whom serves as secretary. The members of the VCC are responsible for the conduct of elections in the voting center, enforcing the duties outlined in the Electoral Code and the by-laws of the CEC for the purpose of implementing the process.

Stakeholders

Building confidence in the electoral process and trust in the operations of the EMB can benefit from having an open and honest communication with the many stakeholders, among which:

- Political parties and candidates (*primary stakeholder*);
- The executive branch of government (*primary stakeholder*);
- Legislatures (*primary stakeholder*);
- Electoral dispute resolution bodies (*primary stakeholder*);
- The judicial system (*primary stakeholder*);
- Election monitors and citizen and international election observers (*secondary stakeholder*);
- The media (*primary stakeholder*);
- The electorate: voters and prospective voters (*primary stakeholder*);
- Civil Society Organizations - CSOs (*secondary stakeholder*); and
- The donor community and electoral assistance agencies (*secondary stakeholder*).

³ *Ibid*, Article 27, Election Administration Areas.

Political Parties and Candidates

A nation can only be considered democratic if its elections feature a genuine contest between several party-backed and/or independent candidates. To select who their post-election representatives will be, voters must have a free and well-informed choice among many policy alternatives and candidates. Political parties and candidates are entrusted with the confidence of the electorate and expected to fulfill the representative duty of government.

The foundation of such a system must be a recognition of the fundamental human rights and freedoms to speak, organize, run for office, and hold meetings or public campaign rallies without fear of intimidation. Citizen engagement in and comprehension of complicated political issues are largely contingent on the ability of political parties to activate and educate, devise meaningful and demand-driven policy alternatives, and channel public opinion during the electoral and governing processes.

During an election, the main political actors for whom the voters cast a vote are:

- "Electoral subjects" - political parties, coalitions and candidates proposed by political parties or voters registered at CEC to run for parliamentary or local government bodies;
- "Political party" - a party registered in accordance with law no. 8580, dated 17.2.2000 "On political parties";
- "Parliamentary party" - a political party that has won and holds at least one seat in the Assembly from the previous elections;
- "Candidates" – a candidate for Member of Parliament or for Mayor, or Member of the Municipal Council, who is supported by a political party or coalition;
- "Candidates presented by a group of voters/independent candidates" – a candidate for Member of Parliament or for Mayor, or Member of the Municipal Council, who is not supported by any political party and who is proposed by the voters;
- "Coalition" - the grouping of two or more political parties that have agreed to compete together in elections.⁴

Election Monitors and Citizen and International Election Observers

An EMB's relationship with election monitors, observers, and other stakeholders is crucial for the safeguard and further improvement of election processes in the country. Election monitors, citizen and foreign election observers are all vital. Election monitors, be they local or international organizations and CSO-s, through their post-election reports, their reflections, their findings and objective suggestions

4 *Ibid*, Article, Definitions.

and insights made available to the legislator, can help in repairing defects in the electoral process. EMBs are required to implement straightforward accreditation processes and to employ accrediting mechanisms that are both efficient and timely for all monitors and observers.

The Media

Print and electronic, public and private, traditional and new media can be an EMB's main ally in educating voters about democracy and elections. Regular newspaper, TV, and radio readers share their news. An EMB needs a media relations plan to ensure trustworthy election information, including EMB activities. Erroneous information can damage an EMB's reputation if it lacks media transparency.

Media should be free to cover elections. They should be free to report on any election-related matters, such as election administration work, competing platforms and programs, candidates' and parties' activities, issues and incidents during the campaign, election-day processes, vote counting, and election results. The freedom of expression principle also covers opinions, interpretations, and projections, and media should uphold these. The media must be free to educate voters by giving a variety of perspectives, including those of journalists and political experts. Media should be free to criticize candidates' records and platforms. How well the media educates citizens relies on many aspects. Independent media outlets should report with neutrality, and independence. They should require their employees to follow these values and not support any politician or party during their work. Despite this general criterion, party press has a wider margin of appreciation with regards to reporting on electoral issues and editorial impartiality.

Media representatives and freelance journalists have the right to be accredited by the CEC as observers during the election period, which will grant them the right to access voting centers, vote counting centers and the premises of the CEC.

The process of accreditation starts with a request submitted to the CEC, under Article 6 of the Electoral Code, *the right to appoint observers*.

Civil Society

Civil society organizations that deal with democratic development, women's empowerment, legal reform, human rights, civic education, governance, and disability rights are not just interested in electoral campaigns and elections. They are sometimes key participating members in the different processes that comprise an election campaign, starting from monitoring of all election preparation phases, observing the elections and issuing reports with findings and recommendations relating to the process itself. Furthermore, they are influential and effective actors in the mobilization of citizens for electoral participation, support for the institutional processes, reducing election-related conflict dynamics and promoting a peaceful

electoral environment. They monitor the behavior of all actors in the process, voter education, and many more roles that cannot be shortlisted into an exhaustive record here, simply due to the nature of civil society itself, which is boundless in its roles and dimensions.

Regular consultation with these stakeholders allows journalists and the media to have a wider spectrum of their unique know how and expertise.

Role of National Institutions in the Electoral Process

The conduct of elections is a collaborative effort that involves a variety of governmental and public institutions, such as the Audiovisual Media Authority, Ministry of the Interior, Ministry of Defense, Civil Registry, Local municipalities and many other actors.

As part of the electoral process, the CEC communicates and coordinates regularly with Government in relation to the budget of the CEC and other requirements for the conduct of elections; Ministry of Interior and General Directorate of Civil Service regarding the voter lists; Ministry of Defense for the distribution of election material all over Albania; Municipalities, to coordinate the establishment of voting centers, accessibility of voting centers, notification of voters of their voting center, handling of voters with disabilities, etc.; Police, for guarding the election materials in the Voting Centers, to maintain order at VCC/CEAZs, to accompany the Ballot Box from Voting Centers to Counting Centers and cooperation to pursue and prevent electoral crimes; Prosecution Offices on issues of decriminalization verifications of candidates and on prosecution of citizens involved in electoral crimes; and finally, the Assembly where the CEC provides annual reporting, follows rigorously the recommendations imposed by the latter through the annual resolution, and contributes to the amendment of electoral legislation to improve the electoral process.

State Institutions Coordinating with the CEC

- Ministry of Interior
- General Directorate of Civil Service
- Ministry of Defense
- Local Government – Municipalities
- Directorate of Police
- Prosecution Office
- National Assembly

The Audiovisual Media Authority (AMA)

The Audiovisual Media Authority (AMA) is the regulatory authority in the field of audio and audiovisual broadcasting services and other support services on the territory of the Republic of Albania.

In its capacity as a media regulator, among its other duties, the AMA monitors the electoral media representation of the broadcasters during the electoral campaign period, until the end of voting on Election Day. If any violations are found, AMA immediately intervenes, based on a request of the Commissioner of the CEC.⁵

Pursuant to the provisions of the Electoral Code,⁶ AMA performs the monitoring of the election campaign throughout the territory where the elections are held. No later than 3 months before the election date, the CEC approves and publishes the Media Monitoring Methodology.⁷

AMA reflects its findings on the monitoring of the media reports on the electoral campaign in detailed reports, at least weekly, which it presents to the CEC for further consideration. The reports are accompanied, as appropriate, with proposals for administrative fines and measures. These reports are published on the CEC website as soon as they are filed with the latter.

Based on these reports, from its own findings, as well as from the information, complaints or denunciations of third parties, the CEC has the ability to request the correction of behavior for radio and television operators or electoral subjects; or, as the case may be, it may impose administrative sanctions on media operators.

5 *Ibid*, Article 84, Election campaign on private radios and televisions.

6 *Ibid*, Article 85, Monitoring the election campaign in the media.

7 See Central Election Commission, Decision on the Methodology for the monitoring of audio and audiovisual media, (Tirana, 2021) URL: http://ama.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Vendim_Nr.002_210130_Per-miratimin-e-metodologjise-se-monitorimit-te-medias-audio-dhe-audiovizive.pdf

2. TYPES OF MEDIA COVERAGE DURING ELECTIONS

While media can be categorized using a number of different criteria, the most essential for the purposes of this handbook are the type of medium – visual, electronic or print.

2.1 Audiovisual Media

In Albania, the law on Audiovisual Media,⁸ through the Audiovisual Media Authority regulates broadcast media to a greater degree than any type of other media. The necessity to ensure the equitable distribution of scarce public resources (such as airwaves and frequencies) and the requirement to hold broadcasters to a specific standard of public responsibility due to the greater impact of the audiovisual media, are the two main justifications that are typically offered.

Broadcast media, especially television, is effective at achieving social, cultural, and political agendas. As such, due to the nature and geographic and population access of broadcast, media regulation structures, whether statutory or self-regulatory, must encourage higher standards of ethics and content. Electronic media sources are private or public. This divide affects the degree of public obligation, restriction, and control. Public and private broadcasters should cover election campaigns fairly and impartially.

Public Service Broadcasters

Public service media, per the law,⁹ are a source of unbiased information and different political viewpoints. They support pluralism and diversity of views by allowing different groups to acquire and distribute information, express themselves, and exchange ideas. They can promote social cohesion, cultural variety, and pluralist communication.

Public service media, which are owned by all citizens, must deliver fair, unbiased, responsible, and balanced news. Using state and/or public media to favor a political party or candidate is a kind of manipulation of public opinion. State-owned or state-funded media, as distinct from a public service broadcaster, are more subject to government pressure, especially in places where they have not yet become fully independent public-service broadcasters.

8 See Law No. 97/2013 “On the audiovisual media in the Republic of Albania” (Tirana, 2013), URL: <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>

9 The National Broadcaster is regulated through Law No. 97/2013 “On the audiovisual media in the Republic of Albania”, URL: <https://rtsh.s3.eu-central-1.amazonaws.com/2021/12/550668963ed-94255b8eaa01d8bb8f5fba.pdf> and the Statute of the national Radio television (RTSH), URL: https://rtsh.s3.eu-central-1.amazonaws.com/cf4f4293531344ad9af0cbacccd1e078_202004071650.pdf

A public service broadcaster must answer to the people, and its ability to hold elected officials accountable is one of its most important duties in sustaining democratic institutions. Other fundamental principles necessary to understanding a Public Service Broadcasters' function include¹⁰:

- Universality: geographically accessible to all citizens throughout the nation, regardless of social standing or income;
- Diversity: its content must reflect the diversity of public interests by offering a variety of media productions, from newscasts to entertainment in any language spoken in the country, be it by the majority or minority of the population;
- Independence: it must be free from political and commercial influence, a truly genuine forum where information, ideas, and criticism can circulate freely;
- Quality: Public broadcast programming must stand out from other broadcast services in terms of the caliber and range of the programs they offer, while also innovating and introducing new genres without excluding audiences or topics that may be disregarded by other media.

In Albania, the Public Broadcaster is duty-bound, in conjunction with the Central Election Commission, to educate the residents about the manner and technique of voting as well as broadcast other information relating to the electoral process. This service is provided free of charge to the citizens and a specific time slot is allotted to the CEC for this purpose.¹¹

Per the Electoral Code, public service broadcasters are required to provide every political candidate or party an equal amount of airtime with stopwatch accuracy, or airtime according to the number of deputies a political party has in parliament. However, this stipulation is only valid for parliamentary parties. The non-parliamentary ones, which compete in elections, as well as independent candidates have quite a specific and different regime, where each non-parliamentary party participating in the elections gets 10 minutes on public television and 10 minutes on public radio, and other specific provisions for news coverage of electoral activities for the latter.¹²

Favoring one political party or candidate is regarded as an abuse of public resources and an illegal manipulation of the public.¹³ Since public broadcasters are owned by citizens and must therefore earn the audience's trust, they are expected to uphold higher and stricter standards than other broadcasters.

¹⁰ See UNESCO, *Public Broadcasting Why? How?* (Montreal, 2001) URL: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000124058>

¹¹ *Ibid*, Article 82, Free minutes for the CEC.

¹² Electoral Code, Articles 80 "Election campaign of electoral subjects on public radio and television" and 81 "Informative editions of public radio and television".

¹³ Electoral Code, Articles 91 "Ban on the use of public resources in support of electoral subjects" and Article 92 "Activities of public institutions in the campaign".

In addition, it is necessary for the Public Broadcaster to fulfill the following obligations:¹⁴

- Offer regular information about the electoral process for people who have sensory disabilities, in a language and format that is accessible and available, as well as in sign language;
- Ensure that all participants in the election process have the opportunity for free political representation between the hours of 18:00 and 22:00 local time, in accordance with the principles of providing a balanced account of elections;
- No later than 30 days before the date of the elections, the Governing Council of Public Radio and Television, based on the data submitted by the CEC for the registered parties, determines the minutes available to each party and organizes, under the supervision of the CEC, the lottery for the assignment of time segments for each registered party, based on timeslots provided by the Electoral Code.¹⁵

Private Broadcasters

Private broadcasters are for-profit businesses, yet they still have quality and quantitative responsibilities with regard to the content, which they produce and broadcast. During political campaigns, this is crucial. Although privately owned, they use a public good: that is, the Albanian state's frequency spectrum. A government authority grants them a license with stipulations relating to news, information, current affairs, and public education.

In their work, and especially during the electoral campaign, despite their business-oriented nature, even privately owned media outlets must adhere to the same journalistic ethics, as any other media format.¹⁶

¹⁴ *Ibid*, Articles 81-83.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, Article 83, Broadcasting schedule.

¹⁶ According to Article 84 of the Albanian Electoral Code, in private radios and televisions, election coverage is limited to informative regular and special editions. Private radios and TVs do not provide broadcast time to political entities for election campaign coverage. Information about election campaign activities that is generated and transmitted in news editions using materials provided by election subjects must be appropriately labeled.

In Albania, journalists are banned from including in their reporting propaganda, commentary, or political opinions.¹⁷ Audiovisual media prepare news with full editorial freedom. When the media is unable to follow specific election activities for objective reasons, it is permitted to use and select film footage from the complete recordings provided by election subjects, as long as it is accompanied by the phrase “*film material provided by the subject...*”¹⁸ Despite the provisions of the law, this practice has received one of the heaviest and continuous criticisms from both domestic and international observers, including ODIHR¹⁹, and encourages media outlets to cover the campaign through their own means, and has requested them to put an end to the practice of using “political party, ready-made tapes”.

2.2 Printed Media (Press)

Private print media may have a wider margin of appreciation with regards to political reporting during election campaigns compared to publicly-funded media. Private print media are less regulated than audiovisual media during elections and have fewer requirements to be unbiased towards candidates and political parties. Print media do not profit from a shared and limited resource like the airwaves. The legal requirements to adhere to non-partisanship and balance are lesser than the visual media’s. Due to declining popularity, print media no longer has a regulatory framework for election campaigns, leaving it to self-regulate in terms of covering political events during elections.

In their news reports, newspapers and magazines are, however, duty-bound to draw a clear distinction between facts and opinions. This principle is strongly tied to how candidates and parties are covered during certain periods, as well as the electoral process itself.²⁰

2.3 Online Media, Social Networks and Emerging Technologies

Online Media

The boundary between conventional media and social media is frequently blurred, with the majority of “traditional” journalists using the Internet as a primary source of information for their articles and many traditional media organizations producing online editions or transitioning into multi-media outlets. Almost every major news

¹⁷ Electoral Code, Article 81, item 5 (*public media*) and Article 84, item ç (*private media*).

¹⁸ *Ibid*, Article 84, item d (*private media*).

¹⁹ OSCE, Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, Parliamentary elections 25 April 2021, ODIHR Limited Election Observation, Mission Final Report, p.20, (Tirana 2021), URL: <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/5/1/493687.pdf>

²⁰ United Nations Development Program, Media and Elections: A Guide for Electoral Practitioners, p. 13, (New York), URL: https://www.eods.eu/library/UNDP-Media_and_Elections_LR.pdf

organization, even in Albania, now has a substantial Internet presence, with many interactive features.

There are numerous opinions regarding the overall impact of new media, but few dispute that it has accelerated global reach of information, enabled communities of interest (political and otherwise) to better organize and communicate despite geographical distances, transformed traditional journalism, and blurred the lines between professional and personal communication. Moreover, new media has enabled individuals, groups, and smaller organizations to challenge traditional media monopolies – an increasing issue for democracy advocates worldwide – by utilizing the borderless and relatively inexpensive infrastructure of the Internet to express alternative viewpoints.

Social Media

Journalists can promote or distribute their work on social media by linking to media sources that have published or broadcast their material. Journalists may blog or tweet about an electoral campaign development to draw attention to it. But they have to be careful. In many places, media groups and self-regulatory bodies issue guidelines and recommendations for bloggers, Facebook and Twitter users, or both.

Election campaigns employ social media. Their use varies per country, depending on how many people have smartphones with Internet access or how widespread the latter is, but it is never wholly absent. Parties and candidates have websites, Facebook pages, and Twitter profiles. They can open or close support groups on different platforms. A campaign may employ different social media strategies as well as dedicated applications to reach and inform their constituent base on their agenda. Audio and video can be published on YouTube and other video hosting websites, or downloaded to cellphones and other devices. The public participates in election discourse through blogs, interactive websites, and online forums. Social media is a vital source of information for journalists, who use it to communicate with their audience and promote their media outlets or own reporting.

Keep in Mind!

- Apply the same principles of professional ethics to social media as you would to any other traditional or online media outlet. This includes routinely verifying content, avoiding potential conflicts of interest, and constantly identifying oneself as a journalist.

Oversight Challenges and Self-regulation of Online Content as a Solution

Internet and mobile phones create new monitoring and coverage concerns for EMBs and the media. They can instantaneously transfer information and ideas across national lines, enabling new media access, voter education, and election coverage choices. Online and mobile content are exploding in their popularity. Political parties

can now engage voters through targeted and smartly designed outreach. New media outlets allow voters to learn about candidates, policies, and elections. New media challenges long-held concepts of media oversight and requires the rewriting of the lines between media control and convergence of existing media platforms.

Internet and mobile platforms are classified differently from broadcasters, newspapers, or one-to-one mediums like landlines. They have certain similarities to conventional media, but also fundamental differences. EMBs and oversight bodies may need to adapt their tactics rapidly considering today's technologies may become obsolete in a fluid environment like that which exists in the Internet.²¹

All types of speech are protected by Article 19 of the ICCPR,²² and, as a treaty document adopted by the United Nations, is “technology neutral” – meaning it does not make a distinction based on platforms and technologies. This includes communication made in chat rooms, blogs, emails, and any other form of communication that is customary for offline media. This also holds true for speech that has been downloaded to mobile phone devices.

However, the lack of a national legislation in this field, i.e., the lack of provisions in the law on electronic communications,²³ or the lack of provisions on the issue in the Electoral Code, as well as the only avenue for remedy being that of application of the Criminal Code²⁴ in instances of grave harm committed, leaves much to be governed by self-regulation.

Self-regulation is the greatest option in such cases: namely, a set of principles or guidelines that experts voluntarily follow. Industry- or company-level self-regulation of online and mobile content focuses on preventing harmful content including hate speech and protecting children from inappropriate material.

Websites in Albania are not regulated by impartiality or balance laws. While the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression²⁵ lays out a right to universal Internet access, the principal requirements placed on nations relating to new media content stipulate the non-interference with free speech on the Internet or similar platforms.

²¹ With regard to the 2021 Parliamentary Elections in Albania, during the thirty days of the election campaign, which began on March 26 and ended on April 24, political parties and candidates reportedly spent a total of 229,198 USD on various forms of political advertising, as stated in an article published by BIRN Albania. According to information that was made available to the public by Facebook, the party in power had the highest expenditures during this campaign on this social network. They spent 88,781 USD on advertisements, which is 38.7% of the total amount spent. The Democratic Party came in second place, spending a total of 36,424 USD during the election campaign on various forms of political advertising. No regulation was in place with regards to social media use and dissemination of political content. <https://www.reporter.al/2021/04/28/partite-politike-shpenzuan-299-mije-usd-gjate-fushates-per-reklama-ne-facebook/>

²² United Nations, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 1966, URL: <https://treaties.un.org/doc/publication/unts/volume%20999/volume-999-i-14668-english.pdf>

²³ Law No. 9918, dated 19.5.2008 “On electronic communications in the Republic of Albania, (Tirana, 2008), URL: https://www.idp.al/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Ligi_9918_dt.19.05.2008_Per_komunikimet_elektronike_i_ndryshuar_2020.pdf

²⁴ Articles 335-332 of Law No. 7895, dated 27.1.1995 “Criminal Code of the Republic of Albania”, (Tirana, 1995), URL: https://www.drejtesia.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Kodi_Penal-1.pdf

²⁵ UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, (New York, 2011), URL: https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/17session/a.hrc.17.27_en.pdf

3. INTERNATIONAL LEGAL STANDARDS FOR FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND ELECTIONS

An important source of guidelines for fundamental human rights and individual political rights is found in some noteworthy international documents, and are referenced in these Guidelines. A number of essential and interconnected human rights, including the freedom of expression, the right to free elections, the right to vote and the right to be elected on the basis of non-discrimination on any basis, refer to the media and elections.

3.1 International Documents

The two rights - freedom of expression and the right to vote and be elected - are defined in a number of fundamental international and regional treaties as well as in a number of other binding or non-binding documents, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), approved by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1948;²⁶ the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 2200A (XXI) of 16 December 1966;²⁷ the European Convention on Human Rights, signed in Rome in 1950 by Council of Europe Member States, and coming into force in 1953, and its Protocols;²⁸ the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, announced in Nice in 2000 and revised in 2007;²⁹ General Comments of the Human Rights Committee at the UN;³⁰ Resolutions of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe;³¹ Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe Resolutions;³² European Commission for

26 UN General Assembly. (1948). *Universal declaration of human rights* (217 [III] A). Paris, URL: <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

27 United Nations (General Assembly), 1966. "International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights." Treaty Series 999 (December): 171, URL: <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/ccpr.pdf>

28 Council of Europe, 1950. "Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms." Council of Europe Treaty Series 005. Strasbourg: Council of Europe, URL: https://www.echr.coe.int/documents/convention_eng.pdf

29 European Union. "Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union." Official Journal of the European Union C83, vol. 53, European Union, 2010, URL: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/charter/pdf/text_en.pdf

30 UN Human Rights Committee (57th sess.: 1996: Geneva), General comment adopted by the Human Rights Committee under article 40, paragraph 4, of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and UN. Human Rights Committee (102nd sess.: 2011: Geneva), General comment no. 34, Article 19, Freedoms of opinion and expression, URL: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/715606?ln=en>

31 Council of Europe, Recommendation No. R(99)15 and Recommendation CM/Rec(2007)15 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on measures concerning media coverage of election campaigns, (Strasbourg, 2015), URL: https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result_details.aspx?ObjectId=09000016805e3c6b and https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result_details.aspx?ObjectId=09000016805d4a3d, and Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)12 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on electoral communication and media coverage of election campaigns, (Strasbourg, 2022) URL: https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result_details.aspx?ObjectId=0900001680a6172e

32 Council of Europe, PACE Resolution 2143 (2017) on Online media and journalism: challenges and accountability, (Strasbourg, 2017), URL: <https://pace.coe.int/en/files/23455/html>

Democracy Through Law guidelines and opinions;³³ and Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Representative on Freedom of the Media joint declarations with The United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression, the Organization of American States (OAS) Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information.³⁴

International treaties describe what member states should do to ensure press freedom during elections. International documents interpret, clarify, and update legal documents or advocate good practices. There are also some important and influential non-binding documents that promote democratic culture and encourage states and other stakeholders to protect free expression.

Articles 19 and 21 of the UDHR describe government responsibilities for media during elections. Article 19 guarantees free speech, while Article 21 guarantees secret, democratic elections.

Universal Declaration of Human Rights - Article 19

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

Universal Declaration of Human Rights - Article 21

Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives.

Everyone has the right of equal access to public service in his country.

The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections, which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.

International human rights law recognizes citizens' rights to participate in political decisions in their countries, notably through elections.

³³ European Commission for Democracy Through Law, Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters, (Strasbourg, 2002), URL: <https://rm.coe.int/090000168092af01>

³⁴ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Joint Declaration on Freedom of Expression and Elections in the Digital Age, 30.04.2020, URL: https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/9/8/451150_0.pdf, Joint Declaration on Politicians and Public Officials and Freedom of Expression, 20.10.2021, URL: https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/9/4/501697_0.pdf, and Joint Declaration on Freedom of Expression and Gender Justice, 03.05.2022, URL: <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/6/4/517266.pdf>.

European Convention on Human Rights - Article 10 Freedom of Expression

*Everyone has the right to freedom of expression. This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers.
This Article shall not prevent States from requiring the licensing of broadcasting, television or cinema enterprises.*

3.2 International Organizations

The following is an explanation of the role of international institutions and their role in safeguarding freedom of expression and the right to information.

The UN Human Rights Committee is a body of independent experts that monitors implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights by its States parties, established by the same 1966 human rights treaty. General Comments of the Human Rights Committee are a significant source of interpretation help for ICCPR States Parties. They reflect the Human Rights Committee's joint knowledge and understanding on the interpretation and application of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Created by the General Assembly in 1993 through its resolution 48/141, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights is mandated by the UN General Assembly to promote and protect the enjoyment and full realization, by all people, of all human rights. The Charter of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and international human rights laws and treaties established those rights.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is a specialized agency of the United Nations aimed at promoting world peace and security through international cooperation in education, arts, sciences and culture. It promotes openness and free expression, with a special focus on the work of journalists and their safety. UNESCO created the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and Impunity to protect journalists and media workers. Its measures include establishing a coordinated inter-agency mechanism to handle journalist safety issues, as well as assisting countries in developing legislation and mechanisms favorable to free expression and information, and supporting their efforts to implement international rules and principles³⁵.

35 UNESCO, Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity, (2016), URL: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000246014>

3.3 Regional Organizations*

Regional organizations use a variety of instruments to carry out regional human rights accords.

The Council of Europe (CoE) uses legally binding documents, such as its conventions and judgments, and non-binding ones, such as recommendations and resolutions, through its constituent bodies, the European Court of Human Rights, the Parliamentary Assembly and the Committee of Ministers, and subsidiary institutions.

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) is the world's largest regional security-oriented intergovernmental organization. Its mandate covers matters such as arms control, promotion of human rights, freedom of the press, and democratization.

It has a comprehensive approach to security that encompasses politico-military, economic and environmental, and human dimensions. It therefore addresses a wide range of security-related concerns, including arms control, confidence- and security-building measures, human rights, national minorities, policing strategies, counter-terrorism and economic and environmental activities.

All 57 participating States enjoy equal status, and decisions are taken by consensus on a politically, but not legally binding basis.

The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), provides support, assistance and expertise to participating States and civil society to promote democracy, rule of law, human rights and tolerance and non-discrimination. ODIHR, among other activities, observes elections, reviews legislation and advises governments on how to develop and sustain democratic institutions.

The work of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media (RFoM) serves as an early warning function and provides rapid response to serious non-compliance with regard to free media and freedom of expression.³⁶

**The guidebook will provide in its endnotes a comprehensive list of useful resources for journalists on the issue of freedom of expression, and information on different topics on international rules, guidelines and tools on freedom of the media and elections.*

³⁶ OSCE, Mandate of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Permanent Council Decision No. 193, 05.12.1997, (Vienna, 1997), URL: <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/b/9/40131.pdf>

4. ETHICAL STANDARDS AND THE ROLE AND IMPORTANCE OF THE MEDIA DURING ELECTIONS

Both the process of elections and the outcomes of those elections may be influenced through the reporting of the media, as the latter is a major stakeholder in the process and a core estate of the civic makeup of a nation. The media may set the agenda for the process through the subjects it covers, the questions it presents, and the tone of its coverage. It also gives voters the information they need to make an informed decision and gives candidates a platform to reach the public. Many political campaigns are won or lost in the media based on how the candidate or subject is portrayed and the extent of their political ad purchases. The media is meant to play a watchdog function and keep residents aware of election concerns, candidate viewpoints, and the various voting how's and why's. It should offer candidates and parties a fair platform for their campaigns and be an impartial, open forum for public discourse.

A well-trained journalistic workforce, an open and independent media industry, and consistent adherence to a clearly stated code of ethics are necessary for achieving this.

Media Standards

Regardless of content or context, there are basic standards for journalistic integrity.³⁷ These include:

ACCURACY This requires careful study, data validation from numerous sources, rigorous reporting, and balanced input from reputable and diversified sources. Accurate reporting separates fact from opinion and follows impartiality principles. Unfounded claims are labeled as such.

FAIRNESS Media and the public are treated fairly and honestly. The reporting should not mislead subjects or audience members. In the absence of a compelling public interest requiring special investigative techniques, those involved in a report are treated fairly and given a thorough explanation of the program or news item they will participate in, as well as the context and limits of their personal involvement in the story. Their refusal to participate should be honored.

³⁷ Standards are derived from the Ethical Journalism Network core principles of ethical journalism, URL: <https://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org/who-we-are> and the International Federation of Journalists Global Charter of Ethics for Journalists, URL: <https://www.ifj.org/who/rules-and-policy/global-charter-of-ethics-for-journalists.html#:~:text=Respect%20for%20the%20facts%20and,of%20fair%20comment%20and%20criticism.>

EQUILIBRIUM AND IMPARTIALITY Balanced reporting should be neutral and simple so readers can establish their own conclusions. Impartiality implies addressing a topic without bias and providing balanced opinions. All parties and opinions should get equal impartial publicity, representation (by inviting people in similar hierarchical positions), and air/space time. It is easier to balance a number of stories/programs in a particular time (week or month) than one feature story/program. When a broadcaster has many radio and TV channels, the principle should be implemented within each channel. Although accuracy and fairness standards encompass components of this principle, the due impartiality principle is only enforceable by law to broadcasters and does not exist as a legal obligation in other sections of the media industry. Still, journalists should be neutral and balanced.

RESPECT FOR THE RIGHT TO PRIVACY This principle demands journalists to protect subjects' privacy. Any invasion of privacy must be justified by a compelling public interest. Politicians who seek public votes should expect greater exposure and less privacy. Everyone should expect more privacy at home than in public, when other standards may apply. This applies to everyone.

RIGHT TO REPLY OR EQUIVALENT REMEDIES This approach enables damaged parties to reply to media material and fix errors. The right of correction is less intrusive and usually enough to remedy factual errors or inaccuracies. The publication must then correct factual errors. An offended party (person, organization, political subject) can demand their reaction be published if they feel misrepresented or want to clarify or correct published/broadcast material. Such replies must be prominent in the publication to attract attention to the inaccuracies, or in a position similar to the original piece or feature.

PROTECTION OF JOURNALISTIC SOURCES As part of their right to information, journalists can protect their sources. They should be truthful to the reader about information stemming from their sources, but they have a right to keep their sources private, as guaranteed by international norms and conventions.

Why do Rules Exist during Electoral processes?

The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights was the first legal declaration of the right to democratic elections and representative government. Since then, the fundamentals of conducting elections have been covered in numerous international and other texts.³⁸ Additionally, they are derived from human rights case law and included in several national constitutions, notably the Constitution of Albania³⁹ and its domestic legislation.⁴⁰ The general, equal, free, secret, and direct voting, as well as the requirement that elections be held on a regular basis, are the six fundamental tenets of democratic elections.

Political plurality and free, direct elections are constitutional norms of democratic societies. The right to vote is equal, general, direct, and can be exercised during free elections by secret ballot, according to the Constitution, which states that “every citizen who has turned 18 is qualified to vote.”⁴¹ The Constitution outlines the general principles of how local and state governments should be organized,⁴² while the Electoral Code contains the specifics governing the election of authorities. Election coverage norms aim to safeguard free and fair election standards. The media helps preserve voter equality and freedom.

To guarantee electoral equality, all candidates, political parties, and coalitions must be given equal opportunity, and the state must be neutral, unbiased, and treat everyone equitably. Neutrality and non-partisanship are especially important in election coverage. Equality of opportunity before the law and its provisions is applied with regards to public funding, alternative sources of support, paid political advertising, and overall campaign spending. However, this equality of opportunity must not be construed as an equality of outcome with regards to financial matters and media coverage, as all candidates and political subjects must adhere to the provisions of the Electoral Code as relates to the latter.

To ensure a free democratic process, voters should be allowed to form, hold, and express opinions. The Electoral Code’s section on electoral campaign and media⁴³ contains standards and rules on information disseminated to the public, coverage of electoral campaigns in media and paid political advertising for parliamentary and local elections.

38 Council of Europe (1950) *Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms*, URL: https://www.echr.coe.int/Documents/Convention_ENG.pdf
United Nations (1966) *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/ProfessionalInterest/ccpr.pdf>
Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (1990) *Document of the Copenhagen Meeting of the Conference on the Human Dimension of the CSCE*, available at: <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/9/c/14304.pdf>

39 See Law No. 8417, dated 21.10.1998, Constitution of the Republic of Albania, (Tirana, 1998), Chapter 3, Articles 45-48

40 Electoral Code.

41 Constitution of the Republic of Albania, Article 45.

42 *Ibid*, Articles 1, 2, 6, 7, 9, 13 and following.

43 Electoral Code, Articles 77 – 85.

To Whom and What do the Rules Refer?

The Electoral Code outlines media coverage rules and principles. Only broadcasting is covered (radio and television). Internet portals, print, and social media are not covered by the Code, save for political commercials and spending.⁴⁴ While the CEC has the authority to set up the policies, rules, regulation and methodologies for monitoring electoral media representation by radio and television services during the electoral campaign, the AMA oversees the implementation of said methodology and reports to the CEC for further consideration.⁴⁵

Other legal provisions are also relevant in the context of elections, such as those noted in the Law on Audiovisual Media Services. It cites the standards and guidelines for radio and television activity and the specific prohibitions against discrimination and the incitement of hatred and intolerance, political ads, the role of the public broadcaster, and those provisions in the Electoral Code regarding broadcasters' and media's equitability and independence.

4.1 Recommendations for Preparation and Professional Reporting for the Election Process Pursuant to National Legislation

4.1.1 Pre-election Process (Electoral Campaign)

Several laws take effect when elections are announced, initiating the start of the electoral process. Beginning with the election campaign,⁴⁶ broadcasters must follow legal criteria for election-related programming and paid political advertising. Radio and TV broadcasters that cover elections must provide fair, impartial, and balanced coverage.

Voters who make up the media audience have a right to be educated about the general election process and the opinions, positions, and platforms of all candidates, as a necessary step towards the democratic process. At the same time, the candidates themselves have the right to equal opportunity to engage with the public, as a means of presenting their ideas, opinions, closely held beliefs and agenda for the future of the nation.

News, special informational programming (interviews, debates, TV/radio contests), free political presentation, and paid and unpaid political advertising are forms of representation in media during elections. Paid and unpaid political advertising

⁴⁴ Electoral Code, Articles 86 and following.

⁴⁵ CEC, Methodology for monitoring audio and audiovisual media, (Tirana 2021), URL: http://ama.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Vendim_Nr.002_210130_Per-miratimin-e-metodologjise-se-monitorimit-te-medias-audio-dhe-audiovizive.pdf

⁴⁶ The election campaign starts 30 days before the election date and ends 24 hours before it. This timeline should not be mistaken with the electoral process itself, which starts months in advance, with the setting of the election day by the President of the Republic, and the carrying out of all the necessary procedures and steps in order to achieve a successful election day and post-election process.

should allow campaign participants free, direct access to voters, in order for the latter to have access to the political platform of the candidates and political subjects.

News and other instructional programs are important since the public relies on them for current events information. These shows must conform to the professional standard of unbiased and objective event coverage by providing alternative points of view of equal weight.

News sources should cover campaigns fairly and in an equitable manner for all candidates. Special educational programs should present a variety of ideas and political possibilities and allow for the free discussion of views, initiatives, and policies. These services let citizens compare candidates and learn how they will address their public needs and concerns, as well as their commitments to the voters.

The Electoral Code requires fair, unbiased, and balanced election coverage in broadcasters' overall programming and provides rules to ensure balance.

How to guarantee fair coverage? By adopting balance and proportionality according to the norms of the Electoral Code, broadcasters ensure all elections media representation is fair and in line with their editorial viewpoint and norms in force. However, how this concept is employed depends on whether a broadcaster is national, regional, or local, as there is a plurality of financial and human resources of broadcasters across Albania. While national broadcasters might have the means to cover all political engagements of the electoral campaign, local ones might be inclined to limit their coverage to their "neck of the woods." Despite this difference in capacity among media outlets, throughout the campaign, broadcasters should cover all political positions fairly. Balanced coverage is essential during the whole duration of electoral reporting, not just in daily or special informative news programs.

Journalists should be unbiased when covering campaign attitudes and behaviors. Editorials and analytical comments are allowed but must be separated from facts.

Paid Political Advertising

According to Article 84 of the Electoral Code of the Republic of Albania, paid political advertising must follow proportionality and equity criteria. Election campaigns negotiate advertising arrangements with media outlets based on their aims, the population they are targeting, the media's power and influence in the market, their finances, etc.

Only registered electoral subjects can broadcast political ads on radios, TVs, or private audiovisual media during the electoral campaign, whether digital, cable, analog, satellite, or by any other manner. Radio and TV operators must submit their prices five days before the election campaign's commencement. The CEC publishes the price list submitted by media outlets online on its official webpage.

According to the Electoral Code political ads are broadcast only between 15:00 and 18:00 and 21:00 and 24:00 of daily programs.

The total airtime for political advertisements during the entire election campaign on each private radio and television broadcaster may not exceed 90 minutes for each party registered in the elections.

Other measures to ensure fair access include mandates that advertising fees be officially determined ahead of time, be applied equally to all contestants, and are barred from changing until the conclusion of the campaign.⁴⁷

Paid political advertising must be appropriately and conspicuously labelled as such, clearly identifying the purchaser and be distinguished from other media materials. In case the political advertisement is not clearly identified, the CEC must order the immediate suspension of its broadcast until it is identified according to requirement above.⁴⁸

4.1.2 Forecasting Elections

Polls before Elections

In numerous countries, conducting polling interviews before Election Day has become customary. The goal is to preview results before the vote of the populace is cast and a general estimate of the election results is provided to all interested.

This strategy is sometimes inaccurate since there is a probability of people not truthfully disclosing their voting intentions. Using statistical sampling, often called outcomes projection, requires prudence. This involves estimating ultimate results from samples. When this strategy is employed in the media, the margin of error should be disclosed. Pursuant to Albanian electoral law, publication of these results must contain the poll organizer's name, the person who ordered/paid for it, the number of people interviewed, and the polls' period. At the same time, election poll results cannot be published less than five days before the election, including the day of the election until voting closes.⁴⁹

One must keep in mind that elections see two forms of polling. One examines difficulties and campaign topics. The other, popularity polls, measure voter intentions. Parties and candidates can conduct their own polls to gauge campaign effectiveness and adjust plans or public perceptions based on voter mood.

Polls are a valuable source of information that cannot be ignored. However, they need to be handled with care. Before choosing to use them, a journalist should carefully review them. Quality of polls vary greatly. Some of them might have been financed and created with the express purpose of influencing the public and the media.

47 Electoral Code, Article 84

48 *Ibid*, Article 80

49 *Ibid*, Article 78, Rights and obligations of electoral subjects during the campaign

An inaccurate poll may have negative effects towards the democratic process. In developing democracies, where polls firms' practices are rarely monitored, this risk is enormous. Unethical polling organizations may utilize biased methodologies to meet client needs (e.g., a sample limited to certain regions, questions tailored to produce particular answers).

Polls Held During and after Election Day

Polls held outside voting centers on Election Day require CEC permission, in the form of accreditation by an organization that has beforehand declared its intentions to conduct exit polls at voting centers.⁵⁰

In these cases, the interviewing of voters for the purpose of the polls is performed in the outer surroundings of the building (voting center), in the interviewing place with clear, distinguishing and explanatory signs and without hindering under any circumstances and for any reason the passage and free entry and exit of the voters to the voting center.⁵¹

As news sources, polls with a "representative" sample have limitations. Despite this, polls can sway the electoral leanings of voters. Hence, there are worries concerning the impact of polls on voter behavior, including the risk that some voters may support the candidate favored by the polls or rebel by supporting a "losing" candidate.

Examples of Harmful Polls

- A study that demonstrates public satisfaction with the performance of the administration is commissioned by the ruling political party.
- A business organization that wants to impose an economic program on parties and candidates commissions a poll on a particular issue.
- A candidate commissioning a poll with harmful or inaccurate information about an opposing candidate.

Therefore, a journalist should:

- Only use research provided by experts who adhere to strict and transparent standards.
- Approach polls with great care.
- Never base an entire piece on a poll.
- If there are several polls available, cite all the data sets and their authors, as well as who has commissioned them.
- Check the performance of the pollsters: How far off were their estimations from the actual results in previous elections?

50 *Ibid*, Article 109, Order and orderly development of voting.

51 *Ibid*.

Questions to Raise Concerning a Poll

- Does the poll have genuine news value?
- Are the poll's results different from those of other polls? Who paid for the poll and who conducted it?
- How was the poll sample designed? Whom does it include?
- When was the poll conducted, and what was the methodology? Is the methodology susceptible to leave-out a portion of the public?
- What questions were asked? Are the results based on all responses or only some of them?

Information to include in any article that includes poll results⁵²:

- The name of the political party, organization or person who commissioned the poll.
- The name of the polling organization and its past performance in polling elections.
- The number of people questioned and the poll's margin of error.
- The date or dates when the poll was conducted and the methodology of data collection.

4.1.3 Election Day and Election Results

Election Silence/Blackout Period

Voters should have time before the election to study all of the campaign's political information without feeling obligated to vote without all the necessary information. For this purpose, the law provides for a period of two days in which no political activity may be conducted. The two days consist of the 24 hours before the opening of the voting centers, and Election Day itself, until the last voting center has closed its doors. During these two days, all media portrayals of election campaign contestants shall stop.

The CEC can fine publishers or radio and TV operators 2,000,000 ALL for breaking the electoral silence/blackout period.⁵³

However, broadcasters have a duty to maintain election coverage during the election silence, in order to provide real time reports on the developments of the process, voter turnout, official notices from the CEC, as well as any incidents and behavior of parties involved in the Elections process. For this purpose, broadcasters may air information identifying actors and/or individuals involved in Election Day incidents or irregularities; photos, audio, or video relating to or featuring election participants and their conduct; reporting on other media actors openly or secretly favoring someone's electoral campaign and influencing voters, or any other activity that may impede or harm the democratic process.

⁵² *Ibid*, Article 78, Rights and obligations of electoral subjects during the campaign.

⁵³ In the elections of 2021, on 27 May, based on the AMA's monitoring findings, the Commissioner fined the public broadcaster for breach of electoral silence, despite many other notifications of infringements by even other private broadcasters, URL: <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/5/1/493687.pdf>, page 20.

When covering voting centers be on the lookout to report on issues such as:

- Voter turnover;
- Overall climate in the voting center;
- Behavior of election officials;
- Behavior of voters;
- Potential issues arising, conflicts and resolution

4.1.4 The Post-election Processes

Election Results

A journalist should announce election results carefully. Careless reporting of this news could promote instability, especially when parties or candidates accuse each other of conspiring in voter fraud. A journalist must clearly explain challenges and appeals and the appeals process step-by-step.

A journalist should exercise caution when broadcasting preliminary or final results before the Central Election Commission's formal pronouncement. This protects balance, fairness, and prevents disinformation.

During the count, journalists may cover the counting centers' atmosphere, such as the number of counters and if all procedures are followed pursuant to the law.

Partial Results, Final Results

It could take a few hours to a number of days to complete the counting, totaling, and dispute resolution processes (which might require recounts). Consequently, results may be released gradually, region by region, district by district, or vote counting center by vote counting center.

Preliminary Results - Voting results are handed by the numbering staff to the CEAZ, then to the CEC, which publishes them on its official website, while clearly labeling them as preliminary results.⁵⁴

Final Results - The final result of the elections is announced by the CEC no later than 5 days from the date of the announcement of the result for the distribution of mandates for each electoral district, and after the potential appeal procedures from the contestants have ended.⁵⁵

The possibility of fraud or falsification during the initial count may be decreased with the use of a journalist's partial results broadcast. However, in accordance with election law, these preliminary results must be supported by official declarations made by the presiding officer of a voting center or the election commission.

54 Electoral Code, Article 119, Publication of election result from the Counting Group

55 Ibid, Article 167, The final result of the elections

During the vote counting process, only members of the electoral administration, members of the counting groups, candidates, observers of electoral subjects, other accredited observers, accredited representatives of the media, are allowed to be present at the Vote Counting Site, as well as the technical personnel for the smooth functioning of the camera system, as authorized by the CEC.⁵⁶

Steps to Take!

First, determine what resources will be needed to produce all the election-related activities and reporting.

Before the campaign begins, you should gather as much information as possible on the parties and candidates.

Communicate with campaign leaders and gauge the public's concerns. Determine the best direct communication strategy based on their approach (mobile, WhatsApp, etc.). Make sure they can be reached quickly.

To cover the election campaign professionally and impartially, you must identify and classify the different types of material. Discuss editorial guidelines for the elections in the newsroom and identify subjects, angles, and voices in reporting. Assign newsroom personnel's defined roles.

Create a social media sourcing policy. Globally, political candidates have embraced a "social media first" communication style, which can be informative. Social media information should not be relied on solely. In addition to established sources, social media should be used to verify information accuracy. Watch out for doctored materials, deep fakes, and AI-generated items.

During campaign coverage, include expert opinions and qualifications and, if applicable, association (University, institute, organization). When citing source material outside of direct interviews, specify when, where, and context.

Assess and contextualize facts provided by a political party or candidate. It is important to differentiate between a government official's statutory duties and political acts.

Questions to parties should be clear and factual. If the person does not answer, keep asking.

Poll results must be viewed with caution. Always specify who commissioned, performed, and sampled the poll, when the data was collected, and the margin of error.

Journalists should wear badges when covering political rallies or other electoral activities (labeled gear, visible press card, etc.). Always identify oneself as a journalist and state the media outlet and program when conducting interviews.

4.2 The Main Principles in Choosing a Topic for Media Coverage

Each political party and candidate have a position on the majority of the important issues, subjects, and considerations that they believe should influence how voters cast their ballots. The majority of political parties draw attention to their leader in hopes that voters will support their candidates. Speeches, marches, and news conferences during an election campaign put the party leader in the spotlight. However, media should also cover the reactions of the populace, the opinions of the opposing views, attendance at rallies, etc. in addition to the words made by the leaders. In order to give voters enough information to compare, media must report on the differences between political parties' positions on the same issues. The media's analytical function also includes an effort to cover topics that are important to the public but are not highlighted by politicians or party candidates.⁵⁷

The issues that editorial offices choose for their media coverage must be chosen with consideration. Real journalistic freedom is essential, especially the ability to choose the most crucial campaign issues without regard to incumbent status or political affiliation.

When making the decisions, these criteria could be used as guidelines:

Significance and Applicability of the Subject

Editorial departments should strive to choose subjects that are noteworthy and crucially important for the national and local interests. Editorial offices are advised to tie any significant daily events affecting the general public into their media coverage of elections. When complicated electoral themes are approached in this manner, the audience will be able to understand them without difficulty while also learning important information.

Clearly Distinguish between Issues of Public and Private Interest

Public interest refers to issues that are believed to have a significant impact on a large number of individuals. Many people in the public are very interested in news articles and subjects that receive less attention than everyday news. When it is in the public interest, candidates are expected to understand the limitations of their right to privacy in order to serve a greater purpose, which is the interest of the group as a whole. Sensational material, such as details about a politician's personal life, should be clearly distinguished from important issues and events that are important to society and the general welfare of the people.

Covering topics that interest a large number of members of the public does not mean that less popular topics, such as issues at the state and local level, as well as problems of associated with minorities and underreported groups should be avoided. Rather, the elections are the perfect opportunity to make politicians and citizens consider how the country is administered and bring forward lingering problems in order to find satisfactory solutions.

⁵⁷ The Albanian Parliamentary Elections of 25 April 2021, Final Report by OSCE/ODIHR, criticized the lack of in-depth and analytical coverage of all contestants, p. 3. URL: <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/5/1/493687.pdf>

4.3 The Main Reporting Issues during the Election Campaign

Journalists must inform the people about electoral issues. To perform this duty, they should report on all political parties and candidates, including their past and current programs and campaign activity. A journalist should find extra sources to avoid relying solely on one-party sources. Parties, aware of the media's influence on voters, use communication tactics to minimize critical coverage and boost campaign messaging. Political parties have public relations offices. These offices are responsible for the development of these strategies and frequently make use of "media professionals" recruited from the ranks of journalists.

Journalists covering a campaign confront one of the toughest challenges: navigating through candidates' political messaging. Press releases, press conferences, social media, and opinion polls require caution and judgement.

There is no room for improvisation in providing superior campaign coverage. Quality election coverage requires preparation. Before a campaign begins, it is necessary to investigate possible candidates so relevant questions may be asked. Questions should reflect public concerns. Coverage should focus on topics that stem from people's daily problems. Journalists have the power to force candidates to address these issues and offer solutions.

Editorial substance and practical layout of election coverage must be established before the start of the electoral campaign. Every news outlet must organize its coverage, their financial and human resources, as well as their ability to schedule and follow the electoral campaign effectively for all candidates. This may involve structuring how important resources are used or maximizing limited resources.

Few occasions are more important in a news organization's history than election coverage. Either it can boost its professional image or erode its trustworthiness. Reporters have a significant stake, as well as responsibility in achieving the organization's goals towards this. They cover rallies, interview candidates, mediate debates, measure public opinion, and publish stories. Reporters must be prepared editorially and logistically.

Their success depends on their media's leaders and editors, when it comes to strategizing and preparing a timed and well thought-out approach to the campaign and different candidates. These individuals are tasked with making judgments that are specific and appropriate about programming and the deployment of workers throughout the election time. Election coverage requires teamwork from all news professionals. This must be done far before the election and begin with planning campaign resources.

Pay Attention!

- Recognize that you have the right and responsibility to communicate with all parties and candidates, including those most critical to the government.
- Reporting should encompass all parts of the campaign that are relevant to the people and the public interest. There are very few and clearly stated reasonable restrictions on one's freedom of expression, and they should not be used as an excuse to stifle the expression of diverse views and perspectives.
- Be receptive and ensure diversity in reporting on voters and their issues. Their vote will determine the future, and the problems of all segments of society – whether dominant or minority – are of equal importance.
- Information must be factual, meticulously documented, and corroborated by outside sources for their work to be regarded as credible.
- When reporting the news, you should avoid making snap judgments and instead retain a disposition of humility, factual rigor, and skepticism.
- When reporting on the opinions of others, you should request the factual reasons upon which the material is founded and refrain from spreading unsupported ideas.
- One should never inject their own opinions into news stories.

4.4 Professional and Ethical Standards in Election Reporting (*Analysis*)

Most journalists view the election season as a crucial part of a country's democratization process. The public expects media and journalistic neutrality in the coverage of political debate. Yet, despite their role in the public domain, journalists do declare their own ideas in the voting booth like any other voter.

Journalists must treat all politicians equally, regardless of their opinions. Journalists must rely on moral and ethical principles to resist pressure and perform well during an election. There is no universal charter on covering elections. Nevertheless, moral standards are consistent among nations.

Keep in Mind!

- When reporting on programs and debates, include all political opponents' viewpoints. Journalists should not allow their personal views to influence the presentation of the material. Reports in the media should never seek to suggest which candidate should be voted for or against.

Journalism operates in the service of the public interest and of facts, ensuring that audiences are well-informed to make political, socio-economic and other choices. Professional journalism must be accurate, unbiased, and respectful of others' dignity. These requirements entail morality, accountability, and the ability to understand opposing ideas. Regardless of the sociopolitical climate, a journalist's first obligation is to the public.

The "fourth estate's"⁵⁸ authority does not serve the interests of any political party, government, or private citizen. The only allegiance a journalist has is to the people they are tasked with informing.

A journalist has every right to communicate with all parties and candidates during an election campaign. This right encompasses all election-related matters that the journalist believes are crucial for citizens and the future of the nation, even those parties and politicians that vehemently disagree with the leadership of the country.

4.4.1 Impartiality

In order for the public to compare party platforms and debates between parties or candidates, a journalist must report on them. However, impartial reporting must never recommend a candidate to the public. A journalist should defer to editorialists and commentators for that task.

Differentiating between Information and Opinion

Editorials and commentary may be subjective, and in a format where a journalist can express his or her own opinion or interpretation of the facts. This interpretation may stem from personal political opinion or conviction on the state of matters/affairs. However, despite this, the journalists' function is to interpret the facts correctly while trying to avoid inaccuracies or fabrications that might be a disservice to public discourse. An honest, relevant viewpoint based on factual evidence has significant worth when presenting political issues and viewpoints for the wider public, while biased positions with a lack of substantive support may harm public perception. Facts should always be the same, despite interpretations and assumptions.

Rule to Follow!

Maintain journalistic independence at all costs, resisting any social, political, or financial pressures that seek to influence reporting. Editors and an individual's sense of ethics may dictate how a story should be addressed.

⁵⁸ The term Fourth Estate or fourth power refers to the press and news media, both explicitly and implicitly, in their capacity to frame advocacy and political concerns. The expression originated during the French Revolution, when the first, second, and third estates consisted of the church, the nobility, and the commoners, respectively. Edmund Burke, an Anglo-Irish statesman, economist, and philosopher coined the term "fourth estate" with regards to the media in 1821 to emphasize the influence of the press.

In all branches of journalism, professionals are supposed to gather and report information impartially. A journalist can ask questions, present competing opinions, and provide context, but must remain unbiased and neutral. All parties and candidates must be covered fairly and neutrally.

Uniformity and Impartiality

Journalists must consider each party and candidate fairly. If they write a story about new roads, and it happens to be a key campaign subject, they should cover all the candidates' and parties' opinions. Neutrality can be achieved by giving each candidate or topic equal publicity and balancing each party's perspective, as long as the information disseminated does not fall into conflict with the other ethical norms herein.

Example 1: If a journalist covers a rally at which a party announces the key components of its platform, that journalist is required to report on the responses of the other parties as soon as they are made public. Sometimes, different journalists are covering different political competitors. Then, it is the newsroom coordinator's job to make sure uniformity and impartiality criteria are met by the media outlet.

Example 2: If a candidate accuses another candidate of some action, and the journalist decides to write about it, they must get in touch with the accused candidate and include his reaction in the piece. It must be stated if that candidate declines to comment.

Example 3: If a media outlet organizes a debate on a matter of public interest during the electoral campaign, all the parties should be invited at the same level of representation or competence. (Party leaders, local leaders, MPs, etc.)

Integrity and Neutrality

A journalist must avoid letting his or her own beliefs show through in reporting or behavior, either directly or indirectly.

A journalist's past, culture, beliefs, and education shape their personality and consciousness. In all aspects of his/her job, they must be unbiased. When covering candidates and political parties, journalists should be as neutral and impartial as possible. The choice of photos, layout, or writing style should not show bias.

Manage quotes, camera angles, story placement, and broadcast settings (studio lighting, sound capture, loudness) equitably for all candidates, without showing positive or negative bias in the production process for one or another contestant. Unrelated to personal beliefs, a journalist must always be dispassionate.

- It is critical to report truthfully and according to the facts. Candidates' and party officials' quotes must be presented accurately and in context. A journalist must follow up with the person for clarification if they are unsure of what was intended.
- If a candidate has spoken in the local tongue and a translation is required, great care must be taken to ensure that the meaning of what was said is not distorted.
- A news report should never be used by journalists to politically endorse a person or group.
- News stories must have a neutral tone. They must report on disagreements between the parties without passing any sort of judgment on them.
- Personal opinions should never be expressed in news stories. It is professional etiquette to keep one's personal opinions about an article's subject matter private. Never should a journalist's opinions on a subject be included in the narrative or even addressed in the news.
- Refrain from expressing any form of opinion about a party or candidate at a rally, during field reporting, or during interviews.
- Never wear or carry apparel, badges, stickers, or other items with the initials, colors or slogans of a party or candidate.

4.4.2 Accuracy

Journalism requires complete accuracy in news pieces. This requires special professional discipline during election seasons. A journalist must seek the truth, tell it completely, and verify all facts in their work.

Information needs to fulfill the following requirements in order to be considered reliable:

- Confirm information accuracy. Elections may often involve manipulation, misinformation, and rumor-mongering. Exercise caution when processing information for personal consumption or further re-publication.
- If uncertain, restrict information to the facts. Use confident grammar. Events, dates, locations, quotes, and other facts must be accurate. A simple factual error can undermine an article's accuracy.
- A journalist must swiftly and conspicuously correct any faults in his work after learning of them.

Be Aware!

- Never forget that information can have both positive and negative consequences. It is essential that news be reported using impartial, sensationalist-free language. When discussing themes that have the potential to worsen existing tensions, special care should be taken. Avoid adding additional music, sound, or visuals that provoke sorrow or rage to the broadcasts.

Information from a Known Source

Journalists should cite references as frequently as they can. It is just a matter of responding to the rhetorical prompt, “Who is speaking?” by identifying the speaker by name, position (candidate, party leader, party activist, or regular citizen), and context.

- An election article based solely on unidentified sources is unreliable. A journalist should avoid this practice!
- Journalists should constantly query why a source demands anonymity when providing sensitive, important, or potentially damaging information. Consider the source’s anonymity. The reporter must first validate with independent sources. Never use an anonymous source that contributes to the rumor mill or make baseless charges.

Preserving the Accuracy and Context of Information

- Be specific. Describe the setting, the level of organization, the topics covered in the speech, and the reactions of the audience while reporting on a rally.
 - Every story must answer the following basic questions:
Who? What? When? Where? and Why?
 - Accuracy issues can skew the truth. For instance, *if a journalist reports that “Candidate X’s speech was enthusiastically greeted,” they must additionally specify whether the audience was made up of the candidate’s supporters or regular people who came to learn more about the candidate.*
In the first instance, the cheers were expected. In the second scenario, the outpouring of support may indicate that the candidate has won over those who were once undecided.

There is always a chance for error. Because of this, a writer covering a topic should always exercise caution and refrain from making definite conclusions. The greatest method to avoid mistakes when doing an assignment is to approach it with discipline and modesty.

- Keep all audio and visual documentation to support your reporting.

An Election is Disrupted by a Rumor

Example: In a nation where an election is taking place, a political movement has called for a boycott of the poll... An unnamed source informs a journalist the day before the election that a voting center in a remote area has been raided and all materials have been compromised. This material is reported by the journalist without any verification or source attribution.

The following day, all media outlets report on the incident, with the exception of a local radio station, whose reporter visits the target village and reports that no such event took place.

However, the damage has already been done. A culture of suspicion and anger has spread across the nation, keeping many voters away from voting centers.

4.4.3 Independence

The public expects media to be fair and accurate. To maintain neutrality and independence, journalists should resist political, social, and financial pressure. Only editorial leadership should establish editorial direction. Freelance journalists should follow the same moral and ethical standards as newsrooms.

A journalist's independence may be compromised by a number of factors during elections:

Example 1: Because of a personal connection to a particular candidate or political subject, the owner of a news organization directs staff journalists to write favorably about that candidate or subject.

Example 2: The government requires that journalists at a state-owned news outlet give the ruling party favorable treatment.

Example 3: After writing a highly critical article about the government, a journalist for a privately-owned news outlet faces pressure from the authorities or the managers of the media.

Example 4: The family members of a journalist are put under pressure from authorities or from politically connected employers.

A journalist should, as much as possible, resist these demands by claiming both their professional ethics and their need to report accurately and impartially. They are free to make these attempts public and ask domestic or international journalist associations for assistance if necessary. Many such press advocacy organizations' main responsibilities is to counter and combat journalists' repression. (Representative on Freedom of the Media, Reporters without Borders, Committee to Protect Journalists, among others.)

Honesty

A journalist must be unbiased while referring to political parties and candidates. Maintaining communication is vital to understanding their political goals and personalities. However, getting too close to them could provide the candidate/political subject with the possibility to sway the journalist in their favor.

Enticing public figures exist. They may pose as a journalist's friend. A journalist must remember they may be encouraged to promote the public figure's character and platform. All such public figures should be dealt with pure professionalism, and the journalist should exercise the utmost caution and discretion in their coverage of them.

A journalist should never:

- Accept cash, gifts, or favors since such gestures can affect one's judgment, cause a conflict of interest, or harm reputation. Newsrooms should set explicit gift guidelines. New York Times has a \$25 cap on presents like coffee mugs and pens. Above this figure, gifts must be politely declined.⁵⁹
- Accommodate a favor for article publication or non-publication.

Offers of Subsidized Travel and Relative Services

Journalists are frequently invited by political parties to attend campaign rallies on the party's dime, which also includes free meals. If these opportunities are not made available to all journalists, then decline them.

Traveling independently or splitting expenses with other journalists is the best strategy, provided one has the necessary funds. A journalist should also receive lodging and food expenses from their news organization.

In order for journalists not to be susceptible to bias, or be accused of bias by the public, it is recommended to accept offers of payment of travel by political parties or candidates only when all political parties or candidates in an electoral race provide such service to all journalists on the same terms. Whenever traveling on such sponsored trips, journalists should make sure that several other colleagues have agreed to receive free travel by asking them. It would be preferable to decline if they have not.

The decision to cover the rally and to choose the angle and subject matter for the story rests solely with the journalist.

⁵⁹ The New York Times, Ethical Journalism: A Handbook of Values and Practices for the News and Opinion Departments, URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/editorial-standards/ethical-journalism.html#>

Independent electoral oversight bodies, be they local or international, offering financial assistance to reporting teams whose news organizations cannot cover the cost of their travel is one potential solution to the issue of rising travel costs. Transportation of journalists should be handled only by the media outlet, with potential cooperation and coordination with other independent organizations, civil society actors or other media outlets; while, the support of political campaign functionaries to journalists should be solely for the provision of the candidates' schedules for campaign stops and communicating campaign agenda.

Additional Rules of Honest Conduct

- A journalist is not allowed to gather information through improper means (For instance, by secretly recording a candidate's interview).
- A journalist is not permitted to exchange information for money or promises.
- A journalist is required to warn people who are not familiar with the media reporting model that what they say might be used in a news report that many people will see or hear.
- A journalist gives credit to the photographers who took the photos that go with his/her work, cite other media work if they use it, and avoids plagiarism.

4.4.4 Hate Speech, Defamation and Campaign Propaganda

Hate Speech

Of all the forms of speech enjoying freedom, the one that is strictly prohibited is hate speech resulting in grave consequences.⁶⁰ There is no precise definition of "hate speech," and its classification depends on the speaker, context, and media.⁶¹ However, the CoE in recent recommendations has provided a unified definition on hate speech, characterizing it as *"all types of expression that incite, promote, spread or justify violence, hatred or discrimination against a person or group of persons, or that denigrates them, by reason of their real or attributed personal characteristics or status such as "race", color, language, religion, nationality, national or ethnic origin, age, disability, sex, gender identity and sexual orientation."*⁶²

⁶⁰ Law no. 7895, dated 27.1.1995, Criminal Code of the Republic of Albania, as amended, (Tirana, 1995), Articles 265, 266 and 267.

⁶¹ The international European standard with regards to hate speech is set by the European Court of Human Rights. The Court applies two review methods to issues involving incitement to hatred and freedom of expression: - exclusion from the Convention's protection, provided for by Article 17 (prohibition of abuse of rights), where the comments in question amount to hate speech and negate the Convention's fundamental values; and - setting restrictions on protection, provided for by Article 10, of the Convention (this approach is adopted where the speech in question, although it is hate speech, is not apt to violate the fundamental values of the Convention). For more information on hate speech and freedom of information please see ECtHR case *Feret v. Belgium*, no. 15615/07, decision dated 10.12.2009, URL: <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-93626>

⁶² Council of Europe, Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)16 of the Committee of Ministers of the CoE to member States on combating hate speech, (Strasbourg, 2016), URL: https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result_details.aspx?ObjectId=0900001680a67955

Media reporting on hate speech is not prohibited. Voters have a right to know about hate speech, which may be a key election issue. However, safeguards must be taken to lessen the messages' impact (*to provide opposing points of views, disclaimers, proper context clarification*). Without a critical context, covering hate speech simply provides it ample room for multiplication. Journalists and the media cannot be a platform for hate speech or promote violence against the constitutional order, military aggression, or hatred for any reason.

Nothing poses a greater issue for those who care about media freedom than the problem of "hate speech." The expression describes support for racial, religious, or other forms of hatred. How far is it acceptable to restrict free speech when it supports restricting or violating others' rights?

Perspective may be a factor. One person's viewpoint may be another's "hate speech." There is a general unwillingness to control speech. Elections exacerbate this difficulty.

This is for two reasons:

- The right time to convey a range of political viewpoints is right before an election. Limiting the expression of certain of these opinions may also restrict people's freedom of speech and participation in democratic processes.
- On the other hand, the tense environment of an election campaign may be exactly the time when provocative remarks are likely to have the impact of encouraging people to violence, thus violating the democratic and free speech rights of others.

These problems are made considerably more pressing in nations with a history of interethnic, religious or communal conflict, where it is well-known that the media has contributed to escalating tensions.

The dilemma is: How can the media carry out its responsibility of reporting the facts without being used as a platform to disseminate divisive ideas, incite animosity, and perhaps even engage in physical violence?

The Main Question: Reporting on Hate Speech

Press councils in certain nations have urged for a complete prohibition on covering hate speech during sensitive times, such as during the lead-up to elections. According to the reasoning, the media is preventing the spread of a message of hatred by not publishing such comments.

However, on the flip side, the media is crucial in exposing hate speech and those who use it. Journalists run the risk of hiding the terrible messages being spread by the persons they are reporting on by failing to disclose what was said.

Pursuant to the Council of Europe recommendations, the media and journalists should be encouraged to promote a culture of tolerance and understanding among its viewers/readers. At the same time, public-service media should make

a particularly substantial contribution to this, given their mandate to serve all sections of society and to enhance societal cohesion. They should not use or disseminate hate speech and, as part of their public mission, they should actively promote intergroup dialogue and understanding as well as the airing of content that portrays in a positive and supportive manner the diversity of voices and sources in the community they serve.⁶³

The media and journalists should, in their efforts to provide accurate and reliable information, avoid derogatory and stereotypical depictions of individuals, groups and communities and give voice to diverse groups and communities in society, especially when reporting on matters of particular public interest and during election periods. They should avoid provoking prejudice and making any unnecessary references to personal characteristics or status.

At the same time, independent national regulatory authorities and media co-regulatory and/or self-regulatory bodies should play a positive role in addressing hate speech. They should be independent from the government, publicly accountable and transparent in their operations.

What Considerations Should the Media Make if it Reports Hate Speech?

- Must a journalist repeat what was stated word for word? Consider mentioning the fact that insulting remarks were made while naming the offender and providing context to the issue.
- Ask the speaker to explain their motivations if you were there at the occasion when the divisive messages were made.
- Obtain feedback from those who are attending the event.
- Get opposing opinions from people of influence and/or community leaders to demonstrate that not everyone shares the harsh viewpoints.
- Contextualize the reporting. Is the speaker trying to deflect attention from other issues by making these statements? Can you ask an analyst to interpret the speaker's motivations for making these remarks? Can you explain the history of the conflicts between various groups?
- Verify the truth of any remarks that assert that they are supported by facts.
- Avoid using overly dramatic wording in your report. Do not "dramatize" your visual stories (e.g., with dramatic or menacing music, visual effects suggesting danger, inflammatory titles or teasers).

63 *Ibid*

Examples of Unbiased Reporting of Hate Speech

Example I

A.Sh., the head of the National Party, insulted the inhabitants of X town by calling them “worms” while campaigning in a nearby town (Y town).

B.A., the head of the opposing party, called A.Sh.’s remarks “racist” and “irresponsible.” B.A. said, alluding to A.Sh.’s desire for violent action against the inhabitants of X town, “His statements bordered on the promotion of genocide.”

B.A. claimed that his nation took great pleasure in its multiculturalism and its citizens’ capacity for harmonious coexistence. Politicians ought to promote togetherness rather than work to splinter it, he said.

Residents in Y town concurred. Shop owner B.P. claimed to have a large clientele and friends in the nearby X town.

Example II

After X Nationalist Party leader P.T. disparaged the Z people in a campaign speech, the community in the nearby town was incensed. Village leader K.U. remarked, “It seems incomprehensible that a politician in a peaceful nation like ours would want to inflame racial conflict before an election. We coexist peacefully with our neighbors, and that is not about to change.”

Shop owner B.V. claimed to have a large clientele and friends in the nearby Z community. She claimed she went to the X Nationalist Party rally to learn more about what P.T. would accomplish for the community if elected. B.V. remarked, “He didn’t say anything about the bridge we need here.

P.T.’s remarks that the Z people were “parasites that should be crushed underfoot” surprised other villagers. P.T. also made threats of violence on local Z traders.

K.T., a national football player, responded to P.T.’s remarks by saying that the politician was attempting to deflect attention from the fact that his party had done nothing for the residents of the community during his current term as a lawmaker.

Hate Speech in Radio and Television

How about in the recording studio? How should I respond to visitors whose interview answers contain profanity and hate speech?

It is crucial to set rules for the use of hate speech on radio and television in order to stop this from occurring. The media should:

- Inform visitors to the studio in advance of the rules.
- Cut off any guests who violate them.
- Confront them on their use of hate speech.
- Give the audience an explanation of the decision to cut someone off and why it is crucial to prevent giving them a platform to disseminate their message.

Checklist for Tolerance

When dealing with stories where political hate-speech is used it is vital not to sensationalize. Ethical journalists will ask:

- It may be outrageous, but is it newsworthy?
- What is the intention of the speaker?
- What will be the impact of publication or broadcast?
- Is there a danger of inflaming passions and incitement to violence?
- Is the speech fact-based and have the claims been tested?

In gathering and editing controversial material, journalists should avoid a rush to publish. It is helpful to pause, even if only for a few moments, to reflect on the contents of the story:

- Have we avoided cliché and stereotypes and challenged them?
- Have we asked all the relevant and necessary questions?
- Have we been sensitive to our audience?
- Have we been temperate in use of language?
- Do the pictures tell the story without resorting to violence and voyeurism/violation of personal life rights?
- Have we used diverse sources and included the voices of relevant minorities?
- Does it meet standards set in editorial and ethical codes?

Defamation

According to Albanian legislation, defamation is the intentional dissemination of knowingly false statements, as well as any other information, that violate the honor and dignity of the person.⁶⁴ Defamation laws generally aim to protect the reputation of individuals from false statements of fact, which cause damage to their reputation. Legal actions for defamation do not require an individual to show any “advocacy of hatred”, and should be distinguished from “hate speech”.⁶⁵

Democratic campaigning includes sometimes offensive debate and use of inaccurate information, which may sometimes breach the dignity and personality of the politicians who are part of the campaign. International and comparative law would imply politicians, especially in government, need to have a thick skin with regards to the protection of their reputation, being afforded less protection in this regard than normal citizens.⁶⁶ From the media’s perspective during an election

⁶⁴ Criminal Code, Article 120, Defamation.

⁶⁵ Article 19, ‘Hate Speech’ Explained: A Toolkit, (London, 2015), URL: <https://www.article19.org/data/files/medialibrary/38231/'Hate-Speech'-Explained---A-Toolkit-%282015-Edition%29.pdf>

⁶⁶ In the *Lingens v. Austria*, 1986 case the ECtHR set out for the first time the principle that politicians inevitably and knowingly lay themselves open to close scrutiny of their every word and deed by both journalists and the public at large; they must consequently display a greater degree of tolerance. With regards to this issue see also *Nadtoka v. Russia*, judgment of 2019 § 42).

campaign, the obvious contrast between defamation and free speech is liability: Who is liable before a potential suit? The media or the individual whose views they publish? And what of the form they take, if it is first hand reporting or if the media reports the position in verbatim accounts of third-party speakers? The Audiovisual Media Law (Articles 51 and following) and the Criminal Code (Articles 119 and following) establish a solid legal framework addressing these two concerns.

Handling Campaign Propaganda

Political advertising is a legitimate form of speech and enjoys the same freedom as any other legal speech.

In the context of media relations, it may be defined as any issue broadcast, published, printed, displayed, or exhibited, in any medium, which contains the name, image, logo, brand, insignia, color motif, initials, and other symbol of representation that is capable of being associated with a candidate or political force, and is exclusively intended to attract the attention of the public.

At its core, is its intention to persuade people of an idea, mobilize them around a political force or candidate, and promote a given ideology.

However, journalists need to discern between political advertising and propaganda, the latter of which aims to promote false information in order to advance a candidate's or political actor's political cause. Political propaganda is typically fear-based, sowing doubt, distrust and anxiety among its audience, as well as reinforcing strong personal beliefs of the constituent base.

At election time, parties and candidates accentuate crucial components of their campaign and ignore others to ensure media coverage matches with their agenda. Press releases and social media updates will contain such campaign narratives and they are often popular among voters. It is written to be readable by journalists, using short, punchy lines that sum up the core point. It gets emailed to news bureaus or shared at press conferences.

In these circumstances, the media and journalists should not print the press releases and materials sent by the political subjects verbatim, but rather evaluate, read into, provide context for, and dispute the information where there are inaccuracies or inconsistencies.

4.4.5 Misinformation and Disinformation

Misinformation contains content that is false, misleading, or taken out of context, but without any intent to deceive; *Disinformation* is the purposeful distribution of false information to manipulate public opinion and cause harm.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication Networks, Content and Technology, A multi-dimensional approach to disinformation: Report of the independent High Level Group on fake news and online disinformation, (Brussels 2018), URL: <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/final-report-high-level-expert-group-fake-news-and-online-disinformation>

Disinformation is false or misleading content purposefully created with an intent to deceive and cause harm. It is typically motivated by three factors: political power or influence, profit, or the desire to sow chaos and confusion.

In general, the primary difference between disinformation and misinformation is intent. Both are forms of fake information, but disinformation is created and shared with the goal of causing harm.

Disinformation campaigns designed to undermine democratic institutions are nothing new. Modern information technologies and platforms, particularly online and social media, transmit information at speeds, distances, and volumes not seen in past election cycles. The Internet's opaque nature and the ability of networks and organizations to exploit "big data" to hyper-target and mislead voters has the capacity to call-to-question the legitimacy of democratic elections.

In many nascent democracies, a vibrant independent media, nimble political parties, and clever civil society organizations can help offset the consequences of fake news⁶⁸ and disinformation campaigns. Many players are increasing their information security procedures to prevent third parties from spreading misinformation to electoral authorities, electoral opponents, and election observers.

These steps include monitoring and reporting on sources of propaganda using online dissemination tools and oftentimes Internet driven fake news and social media bots encouraging anti-democratic extremism.⁶⁹ "Electoral interference" and media warfare imperil democracy. More cooperation and specified approaches are needed to evaluate, monitor, and mitigate the impact of disinformation on electoral integrity.

To uncover election campaign weaknesses, mapping the information environment is a must. A risk assessment should identify threat actors who could launch an information manipulation campaign and the channels they might use, such as the Internet, broadcast, radio, or print.

Journalists and the media should determine which partners they will work with to confront potential threats, such as social media company representatives, elected officials, police, or civil society organizations (CSOs).

Mapping and Understanding the Information Landscape (This can be made into a sequential arrow graph – Step 1 – Step 2 – Step 3 etc.)

68 Edson C. Tandoc Jr., Zheng Wei Lim & Richard Ling (2018) Defining "Fake News", Digital Journalism, 6:2, 137-153, URL: https://edisciplinas.usp.br/pluginfile.php/4948550/mod_resource/content/1/Fake%20News%20Digital%20Journalism%20-%20Tandoc.pdf

European Parliament, Directorate-general for External Policies, mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them, P. 11, (Brussels 2021), URL: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU\(2020\)653621_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU(2020)653621_EN.pdf)

69 European Foundation for South Asian Studies (EFSAS), The role of fake news in fueling hate speech and extremism online; Promoting adequate measures for tackling the phenomenon, URL: <https://www.efsas.org/publications/study-papers/the-role-of-fake-news-in-fueling-hate-speech-and-extremism-online/>

What is the media and information landscape?

Understanding the present media environment is the first step in mapping the information environment.

- *Where do individuals go to learn about political information?*
- *Where is it most likely that information tampering will occur?*

Consider traditional media outlets here, such as radio and television stations, newspapers, and magazines, and evaluate their ownership transparency, their open or covert political leaning, their editorial practices, and their adherence to industry standards.

Digital media, including social media websites, secure chat programs, and online discussion forums, should also be taken into account. Journalists should review the terms of service and community rules of platforms where they anticipate information operations may occur, as well as any additional country-specific policies that may have been stated in corporate blogs, to become familiar with their policies.

- *Which user communities are more susceptible to information manipulation or the harmful effects of these efforts and where are the online audiences?*

According to the Center for International Governance Innovation research on the issue, women, persons of color, people with low media literacy, and minorities are disproportionately influenced by information manipulation;⁷⁰ moreover, research suggests communities of older individuals are also more prone to deception.⁷¹ Understanding the viewers and the groups that may be disenfranchised, silenced, or significantly impacted by continuing information manipulation activities is the second step in mapping the information environment.

- *Who poses the greatest threat?*

Finding and understanding threat actors is the third phase in mapping the information environment. Journalists can be more resilient to operations if they know who manipulates information.

Questions to Pose:

Who poses the greatest threat to accuracy—domestic actors, foreign malign influences, or both? Are these campaigns being run with the intention of causing political unrest or are they for financial gain?

70 See Samuel Woolley, In Many Democracies, Disinformation Targets the Most Vulnerable, (2022), URL: <https://www.cigionline.org/articles/in-many-democracies-disinformation-targets-the-most-vulnerable/>

71 See Andrew Guess, Jonathan Nagler, and Joshua Tucker, Less than you think: Prevalence and predictors of fake news dissemination on Facebook, (2019), URL: <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/sciadv.aau4586>

- *Who are some allies journalists may enlist in the fight against disinformation?*

Information environment mapping is one way to combat disinformation. It requires the assistance of allies to resist information manipulation. Journalists should find public and private partners, such as election management groups, to respond to information manipulation. They can work with journalists and CSOs in their country to fact-check or counter information manipulation.

Identifying Common Information Manipulation Narratives

After assessing the information environment, journalists need to consider the narratives or themes different actors may use in information manipulation campaigns. A non-exhaustive list of disinformation patterns may be found below.

DISINFORMATION PATTERNS⁷²

1. Information manipulation uses provocative and controversial content to increase political, racial, religious, cultural, or gender differences. These narratives often stress societal divisions and use identity-based narratives to promote discord and dissatisfaction. In numerous countries, “vilification” campaigns target women, the elderly, national or religious minorities, sexual minorities, and migrants.
2. Delegitimization narratives (or campaigns to discredit) compromise electoral fairness. This may involve inflated claims about voting system security, ballot casting or tabulation errors, or other reported irregularities. These stories try to sow electoral distrust. Delegitimization narratives may discredit politicians, candidates, electoral officials, or civic organizations.
3. Political tales of repression discourage participation by certain populations. Anti-democratic tactics include spreading incorrect information about how and where to vote, stating that some groups cannot vote, or alleging there is violence at voting centers. They may also promote voter fraud or urge individuals to attend or avoid political activities.
4. Hate, harassment, and violence prohibit some individuals or communities from expressing their opinions online or engaging in crucial debates for a healthy democracy. It can restrict political expression and encourage fear.
5. Premature election results or win pronouncements are often publicized online to undermine voter faith. In tight and heated political races, they often occur before the vote total is known or voting process is finalized.

⁷² International Republican Institute, *Combating Information Manipulation: A Playbook for Elections and Beyond*, (2021), URL: <https://www.iri.org/resources/combating-information-manipulation-a-playbook-for-elections-and-beyond/>

OPEN-SOURCE INTELLIGENCE (OSINT) TOOLS FOR IDENTIFYING INFORMATION MANIPULATION

Information gathered and analyzed from open (public) sources is known as OSINT. These tools can be used to track down and spot false information.

Bellingcat's Online Investigation Toolkit:⁷³ This simple Google Doc spreadsheet has tabs for a variety of tools for information verification, including tabs for image and video verification, social media content and accounts, phone numbers and closed messaging services, transport trackers, IP and website analysis, international businesses, the environment, academic resources, and additional guides. It also has tabs for maps and location-based services, maps, phone numbers, and other information that can be used to verify information.

Data Journalism's Verification Handbook for Disinformation and Media Manipulation:⁷⁴ (Guide) This manual enables the user undertake OSINT investigation into social media accounts, bot identification, and image manipulation. Along with advice and tools for attribution, it also offers resources for conducting investigations online and across platforms.

The Beacon Project's Media Monitoring Handbook:⁷⁵ (Guide) This resource helps users analyze misinformation narratives and their origins using data. The manual is a helpful place to start for academics who want to do media monitoring but are unsure of where to begin, as well as those who want to make sure that best practices are being followed when it comes to methodology.

CrowdTangle:⁷⁶ (Tool) CrowdTangle was developed by Facebook as a tool for tracking and recognizing social media trends. The tool can monitor public Groups, Pages, and verified accounts. Additionally, the application may be used to keep an eye on Reddit or subreddit threads and public Instagram accounts.

4.4.6 Public Interest

Press freedom necessitates responsibility. Journalists can contribute to resolving political crises and conflicts even while carrying out their professional duties in their roles as public citizens. However, journalists differ from the average person in that their words draw attention.

73 URL: <https://p.avmedianow.com/b/e/bellingcat-s-online-investigation-toolkit-242.pdf>

74 URL: <https://s3.eu-central-1.amazonaws.com/datajournalismcom/handbooks/Verification-Handbook-3.pdf>

75 URL: <https://www.data-iribeaconproject.org/handbook/>

76 URL: <https://www.crowdtangle.com/features>

In their work, and especially during elections, journalists and the media must promote the public interest. Audiences must understand news, especially news related to the electoral process and what that entails for their future. A journalist must remember that the election process poses complications even for voters, with technical information not only on the standing of candidates, but also on the process in itself, as well as the rights and obligations of the voters that ensures elections be orderly and successful. Access to articles must always be provided to as many people as possible, for educational purposes.

A talented journalist can transmit a lot of information in few words, while a less experienced journalist utilizes many words to convey little.

- Use one-thought sentences. Outline a story before writing it. With an outline, a reporter can define a situation or problem and decide how to express it. An outline helps the reporter choose the most important components of a topic and the best order to present them for a logical and accessible piece.
- Avoid political and technical language. This is especially critical for broadcast journalists, whose viewers should absorb the story's gist in seconds.
- Use visual aids (graphs, photos, illustrations) whenever possible to explain complex processes or present figures.

The roles of the media during an electoral campaign, with regards to public interest are twofold: as a watchdog as well as an educator of the public.

Media as an Educator

As a public educator, the media combines its basic functions with a few extra obligations. Using the media as a tool for openness ensures that voters have the data they need to evaluate politicians and the process. The media ensures that the public is informed about all parties' and candidates' platforms. Voters themselves, apart from political parties and candidates, can use information from the media to enlighten other voters, lawmakers, and government officials on the developments in the process and their experiences.

Media teaches through voter information. Direct talks with EMBs and NGOs for content dissemination may help. When the media covers an election, they may include details on voting places, voter registration, the voting process, and ballot counting.

KEY OBLIGATION OF THE MEDIA AND JOURNALISTS IN INFORMING THE PUBLIC

- The media is required to tell the public about voting procedures:
- Who is eligible to vote and run for office?
- How does a person sign up to vote, where do they do it, and when?
- How, where, and when do voters cast ballots?
- Are there any restrictions people should observe during the voting?
- What are the penalties for electoral law violations?
- Is this a parliamentary, or local election?
- What roles will candidates be elected to, and what authority and duties will those elected hold?

4.4.7 Transparency and Access to Information

In elections, all contestants must have access to the media.⁷⁷ Usually, an electoral commission or media-regulatory agency decides rule implementation and sanctions. Journalists must be informed about and consulted in the process of drafting and implementation of election laws and regulations pertaining to their area of expertise. Equal access to the number of media outlets is not always fair with regards to the coverage and access to the voters through the airwaves. When there are multiple parties or candidates, space or airtime might be allocated based on “importance of subjects” i.e., percentage of seats in the preceding parliament. The most common selection criteria are the number of seats in the legislature, the proportion of votes cast in the most recent election, or the political contestant’s status relative to their status as a parliamentary subject or not, i.e., whether it is a party inside or outside parliament, or an independent candidate.

Access to Publicly-owned Media

The Public Service Broadcaster is a public utility. This requires strict enforcement of the law. Government interference should not affect publicly held media beyond ensuring equal airwave access for everybody. The most important aspect in securing equitable access for all contenders is the allocation of air time based on clear criteria.

Under Albanian electoral law, for the parliamentary parties, which in the last elections for the Assembly received more than 20 percent of the seats, the CEC assigns an equal number of minutes. This represents no less than 30 minutes on public television and the same amount on public radio, while for other parliamentary parties, this time is not less than 15 minutes. Any increase of the time of broadcasting a party or a relevant coalition, proportionally increases the time available to another party or coalition. At the same time, each non-parliamentary party that participates in the elections gets 10 minutes in public television and 10 minutes on public radio.⁷⁸

77 Electoral Code, Article 81, Informative editions of public radio and television.

78 Ibid, Article 80, Election campaign of electoral subjects on public radio and television.

Access to Privately-owned Audiovisual Media

Private media must treat all parties and candidates fairly. Some governments exempt privately-owned media from election law, with regards to balance and proportionality, to protect their editorial independence. To ensure fairness in election coverage, the Albanian framework contains clear rules for commercial broadcasters' participation. In Albania, the restrictions governing privately owned media during election campaigns are nearly the same as those governing publicly held media.

Private radios and TVs only cover elections in regularly scheduled and special news editions. Outside of these two programming slots, private radios and TVs do not usually cover electoral campaigns. According to CEC regulations, election campaign content created and disseminated through audiovisual media must be explicitly recognized. With regards to the position of domestic and international observers on the issue of "ready-made tapes" please refer to page (now it is page 12 must fix when final edited form is printed).

Private media outlets must follow all journalistic principles during elections, including avoiding provocative or harsh language and slanted or libelous content. All media, whether public or private, must adhere to Electoral Code deadlines to respect campaign-silence periods and limitations on reporting poll results before and during elections.

Access to Online Media

Online media, especially electronic media or multimedia renditions of conventional media, is another arena where equal access for all parties and candidates is preferably applicable, despite a lack of legal regulation in the Albanian media environment. This concept is harder to apply due to the Internet's boundless publication space and the multitude of unregulated outlets therein. Contrary to a newspaper, radio station, or TV station, an Internet media organization does not typically plan how much information it will deliver each day. Conversely, due to the nature of online media, an individual has the freedom to research and report on a candidate to whatever extent they wish, and receive information from a multitude of sources, that can further enrich their knowledge of that candidate's agenda, promises, and potential.

States and international courts have raised self-regulatory methods for online media.⁷⁹

- If a media site allows readers to enter comments, it should strive to monitor and mediate the forum in a way that does not allow slander or defamation to be used by commenters towards political parties or candidates;
- The online media should apply the same "good faith journalism" requirements and ensure that articles be been written in compliance with "ordinary journalistic obligations" to verify a factual allegation;

⁷⁹ See Cappello M. (ed.), Media coverage of elections: the legal framework in Europe, IRIS Special, European Audiovisual Observatory, (Strasbourg, 2017), URL: <https://rm.coe.int/16807834b2>

Due to the nature of electoral campaigns, the procedures for creating a balanced and unbiased comment section on online media publications are often unenforceable, as there is no newsroom that can stop party supporters from posting more commentary in support of their candidate in an online forum than others.

4.4.8 Human Dignity and Non-discrimination

International norms and standards on political participation include the ability to regulate public affairs, vote and be elected, and gain public service. The UN Human Rights Committee defines public affairs as “exercising legislative, executive, and administrative functions”. It involves public administration, policy creation and execution at international, national, regional, and local levels.⁸⁰

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that a government’s legitimacy must be based on popular will. These two principles go hand in hand. Elections must respect human rights and the public’s decision-making. Only legal, nondiscriminatory, unbiased, reasonable participation limitations may be applied.⁸¹ Participatory rights cannot be arbitrarily restricted based on race, color, sex, language, religion, political opinion, or other association, as well as wealth, birthplace, disability, or other status. Discriminatory restrictions include economic requirements, such as property ownership,⁸² excessive residency requirements,⁸³ restrictions on the right to vote for naturalized citizens (as opposed to citizens by birth), literacy or educational requirements,⁸⁴ and excessive restrictions on the voting rights of convicted criminals.⁸⁵

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities also considers limitations on political participation based on a handicap to be discriminatory.⁸⁶ The right to equal access to public service⁸⁷ is expressly subject to the prohibition of discrimination under article 2 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, much like the right to vote and the right to run for office.

⁸⁰ See United Nations, Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 25 (New York, 1996), para. 5

⁸¹ See United Nations, Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 25 (New York, 1996), paras. 3–4. See also, inter alia, Staderini and De Lucia v. Italy (CCPR/C/127/D/2656/2015), para. 9.5; Delgado Burgoa v. Plurinational State of Bolivia (CCPR/C/122/D/2628/2015), para. 11.5; Nasheed v. Maldives (CCPR/C/122/D/2270/2013-CCPR/C/122/D/2851/2016), para. 8.6; and Paksas v. Lithuania (CCPR/C/110/D/2155/2012), para. 8.4.)

⁸² See United Nations, Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 25 (New York, 1996), para. 3

⁸³ See United Nations, Human Rights Committee, Concluding observations on the fourth periodic report of Uzbekistan, CCPR/C/UZB/CO/4, para. 26, (New York, 2015), URL: https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CCPR%2FC%2FUZB%2FCO%2F4&Lang=en

⁸⁴ See UN Human Rights Committee, general comment No. 25 (1996), para. 10

⁸⁵ See ECtHR, Case of Yevdokimov and Rezanov v. Russian Federation (CCPR/C/101/D/1410/2005), para.7.5; CCPR/C/EST/CO/4, paras. 33–34

⁸⁶ See United Nations. 2006. “Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.” Treaty Series 2515 (December): 3, Arts. 2, 5 (2) and 29, URK: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities-2.html>

⁸⁷ See United Nations (General Assembly). 1966. “International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.” Treaty Series 999 (December): 171, Art. 25 (c). See also International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, art. 5; Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, art. 7; and Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, art. 29.

Other universal human rights instruments, such as the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights,⁸⁸ the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination,⁸⁹ the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women,⁹⁰ the Convention on the Rights of the Child,⁹¹ and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities,⁹² all contain relevant provisions with regards to this issue.

A journalist should be conscious of both the potential benefits and drawbacks of his work. This suggests that, whatever the subject, he should use as neutral and sober a tone and language as possible.

This implies the use of calm judgment when addressing subjects with the potential to stir up controversy, such as those that may result in the stigmatization of particular people or groups.

A journalist should respect the presumption of innocence and the dignity of all people in light of these factors.

4.4.9 Reporting on Gender-sensitive Issues

As voters, candidates, politicians, members of civil society, or in other roles, women's political participation is vital for exercising their civil and political rights. It is also important since it allows nations to utilize all their human resources to progress and ensures that women and girls' interests are considered when formulating legislation. Gender stereotypes and prejudice may impact men and women disproportionately, but as a phenomenon, they affect the general make-up of the society as a whole.

In the most recent decades, women's involvement in political processes has increased in most nations. In the 50 years leading up to 1995, the proportion of women in parliament climbed by a factor of four.⁹³ Nevertheless, even in well-established democracies, the proportion of women in parliament in 2022 is still well below parity (France 39.5%, Germany 34.9%, Italy, 36.3%, UK 34.7%, Greece 21%).⁹⁴

88 See United Nations (General Assembly). 1966. "International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights." Treaty Series 999 (December): 171, URL: https://treaties.un.org/doc/Treaties/1976/01/19760103%2009-57%20PM/Ch_IV_03.pdf

89 See United Nations. 1966. "International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination." Treaty Series 660 (March): 195, URL: <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/cerd.pdf>

90 UN General Assembly, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, 18 December 1979, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 1249, p. 13, URL: <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/cedaw.pdf>

91 See United Nations, Convention on the rights of the child (1989) Treaty no. 27531. United Nations Treaty Series, 1577, pp. URL: <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/crc.pdf>

92 See United Nations. 2006. "Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities." Treaty Series 2515 (December): 3, URL: https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/CTC/Ch_IV_15.pdf

93 See Inter-Parliamentary Union, Women in Politics: 30 Years in Retrospect, (Data sheet), 2006, URL: http://archive.ipu.org/pdf/publications/wmnnfokit06_en.pdf

94 See International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, Gender Quotas Database in Parliament Worldwide, URL: <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/gender-quotas>

As of 1 September 2021, there are 26 women serving as Heads of State and/or Government in 24 countries. At the current rate, gender equality in the highest positions of power will not be reached for another 130 years.⁹⁵ Just 10 countries have a woman Head of State, and 13 countries have a woman Head of Government.

In Albania, there are 12 women who hold ministerial portfolios in the government consisting of 15 Ministers and one Prime Minister,⁹⁶ and 50 members of parliament representing their constituents, in a Parliament consisting of 140 MPs.⁹⁷

Historical data has shown that in politics gender prejudices and participation limits persist. Although more women are serving in parliaments, they are less likely to be ministers or hold the highest post (president, prime minister, etc.). This general trend has been challenged in the later years in Albania, where a number of key ministerial portfolios such as Defense, Foreign Affairs, Finance and Economy have been entrusted to women.

The media impact the political agenda, including that associated with gender, as electoral campaigns and political advertising nowadays have shifted from traditional media to new forms of online and social media. The media does this by choosing issues and individuals they consider newsworthy. Whether a candidate is present or not, and the type of coverage they receive while they are present, all condition their prospects of being elected, as voters get their political information from the media.

This issue has also been raised by OSCE/ODIHR in the Final report for the 2021 Elections. The report noted that *“The main parties all attempted to increase the visibility of women as candidates in the campaign, and the mandatory quota for women was exceeded in most candidate lists. Women received over one third of the seats in the new parliament. Female candidates and other actors received only 19 per cent of campaign coverage in the news and current-affairs programs in the media monitored by the ODIHR EOM. Women were underrepresented throughout the election administration.”*⁹⁸

Since most people do not connect directly with candidates, the media and journalists play a crucial role in expressing voter concerns and ensuring politicians address their own programs and public issues. Journalists must raise these issues, such as gender, to policymakers’ attention. As part of these issues, journalists must lead the public toward serious matters, not frivolous ones, which can often take center stage while being unimportant. Some common mistakes are:

95 UN Women calculation based on information provided by Permanent Missions to the United Nations. Some leaders hold positions of both head of government and head of state. Only elected Heads of State have been taken into account.

96 Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Albania, November 2022, URL: <https://www.kryeministria.al/en/geveria/>

97 Data retrieved from the Parliament of Albania webpage, November 2022, URL: <http://www.parlament.al/deputet>

98 OSCE, Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, Parliamentary elections 25 April 2021, ODIHR Limited Election Observation, Mission Final Report, p.2, (Tirana, 2021), URL: <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/5/1/493687.pdf>

i. Prefer Style over Substance

More comments are made about women’s hair, weight, and dress than their voting records, policies, and programs. Six percent of women’s news coverage in the 2002 U.S. gubernatorial and senatorial elections focused their appearance, compared to one percent of men’s.⁹⁹

A report by the Observatory for Children and Youth Rights, with the support of UN Women in Albania,¹⁰⁰ found that during the 2021 Albanian parliamentary elections campaign, despite the fact that women made up 40% of parliamentary candidates, in articles or broadcasts where candidates were mentioned or discussed, only 22% of the stories were about women, and the remaining 78% were about men. The same report illustrated the use of graphic images for presenting and contrasting candidates during a televised meeting of the ruling party, eliciting responses and criticism from across the political spectrum and from civil society organizations.¹⁰¹

In the 2021 post-election report issued by the OSCE-ODIHR office in Tirana, it was noted that there were “a few standout instances during the campaign of sexist language used against women”.¹⁰²

ii. Sexualization

According to research on sexism, harassment, and violence against women legislators from 39 nations across five areas of the world, 27.3% of respondents felt disparaging or sexually challenging photos or statements about them have been featured in traditional media. This number rose to 41.8% for social media photos or comments.¹⁰³

iii. Family and Personal Status

It frequently makes headlines that female politicians are either single mothers or have children. For men, the topic of how they balance work and home life is rarely discussed in the media. However, this difficulty—often referred to as the “juggling act”—is always there for women.¹⁰⁴

99 See Dianne G. Bystrom, Mary Christine Banwart, Lynda Lee Kaid and Terry A. Robertson, *Gender and Campaign Communication: TV Ads, Web Sites, and Media Coverage*, 2006.

100 Observatory for Children and Youth Rights, *Violence against women during elections (VAWE) and gender bias in media coverage of the 2021 elections in Albania*, (Tirana, 2021), URL: https://albania.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-06/media_brief_web.pdf

101 The case pertains the derogatory comments of the prime Minister during the opening days of the campaign against the opposition member Grida Duma, URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tk6nr3zwQBE>

102 OSCE, Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, *Parliamentary elections 25 April 2021, ODIHR Limited Election Observation, Mission Final Report*, p.14, (Tirana, 2021), URL: <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/5/1/493687.pdf>

103 Inter-Parliamentary Union, *Sexism, Harassment and violence against women parliamentarians*, (Geneva, 2016), URL: <http://archive.ipu.org/pdf/publications/issuesbrief-e.pdf>

104 Council of Europe, *Portraying Politics- A Toolkit on Gender and Television*, (Strasbourg, 2005), URL: <https://www.Coe.int/T/Dg4/Cultureheritage/Mars/Source/Resources/References/Others/53%20-%20Portraying%20Politics%20-%202006%20COMP.Pdf>

Gender Issues Coverage Rules¹⁰⁵

- Promote broadcasting that is inclusive and reflects gender-based differences of perspective on the issues at stake;
- Ensure that the set-up of shows, selection of guests, time attributed to each guest, role of host, framing of shots, allow female candidates to provide effective contribution to the debate and to avoid the stereotype which puts men at the center and women at the margins of politics;
- Avoid using gender stereotypes or biased language;
- Make equal gender representation a matter for editorial policy;
- Avoid the “tabloidization” of media when featuring female candidates;
- Avoid women candidates to be identified with sexist references i.e., reference to their family status or their relationship with others (“mother”, “wife”, “daughter”, etc.);
- Promote training of both female and male journalists on gender equality aimed at including a gender dimension to political coverage;
- Monitor gender commitments made by political parties and reporting on their progress;
- Monitor regularly their own output setting targets for an equal gender representation.
- Adopt gender-sensitive policies in newsrooms.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Anita Ramšak, PhD, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Slovenia, Guidelines for Gender Sensitive Reporting, (Ljubljana, 2017), URL: http://www.ekvilib.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/en_GUIDELINES_FOR_GENDER_SENSITIVE_REPORTING.pdf

¹⁰⁶ For additional resources on gender sensitive issues during elections, please refer to ACE Project Gender and Elections, URL: <https://aceproject.org/ace-en/topics/ge/onePage>

FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Following fundamental professional ethical guidelines is the best way for a journalist to shield themselves from the myriad of pressures that might be expected throughout the election season. A journalist must never lose sight of the fact that they represent the views and concerns of average citizens and acts with a public interest mandate, irrespective of the ownership (public or private) of the medium they work with.

The responsibility of a journalist is not limited to only covering the political battle. Always at the forefront of his or her mind should be the question of whether or not the conditions are in place for a free and fair elections, conducted in an open manner and producing trustworthy results. It is the responsibility of the journalists and the media to keep the public informed of errors, irregularities, and abuses that they have documented, without attempting to play the position of a police officer, judge, or election commissioner.

Journalists have a responsibility to:

1. Ensure that they report on compliance with the election's legal requirements, giving special attention to the eligibility of candidates and the demarcation of voting districts;
2. Cover the role and work of the CEC, all governmental bodies and agencies, and the respective personnel that play a part in the electoral process. Question and qualify all leadership appointments made to such organizations, as well as its track-record and conduct during the elections;
3. Examine how the CEC and local institutions instruct residents on voting procedures, including what is permitted and what is not. Assist the public in gaining knowledge about these concerns, including voting hours, locations, and procedures. Report any obstacles found;
4. Investigate whether political parties and candidates conform to the rights and obligations established in the Electoral Code and other applicable legislation;
5. Ensure that all political parties and candidates have an equal voice in the media, especially in publicly owned news organizations;
6. On Election Day, make a point to visit multiple voting centers and vote counting centers, to ensure that voting and vote counting are conducted fairly and accurately. Pay attention to small, rural, or isolated populations. Give special consideration to voting in minority neighborhoods;
7. Election results that have not been officially announced by the electoral commission must not be published or broadcast;
8. In cases where results are contested, journalists must specify the particular reasons why the results were challenged, as well as the procedure that must be followed when filing appeals;

9. Be able to differentiate between election irregularities that may have occurred due to a lack of training or knowledge on the part of election staffers and those that reflect fraud with the aim to alter the results of the vote;
10. Civil society organizations and other civic actors should be used as sources when evaluating the electoral process and providing information to the public.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR JOURNALISTS

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- Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Commitments: Freedom of the Media, Freedom of Expression, Free Flow of Information, 1975-2017, 2017, https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/4/f/99565_0.pdf
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- Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Guidelines for Observation of Election Campaigns on Social Networks, 2021, URL: https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/4/1/500581_0.pdf

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- Dianne G. Bystrom, Mary Christine Banwart, Lynda Lee Kaid and Terry A. Robertson, Gender and Campaign Communication: TV Ads, Web Sites, and Media Coverage, 2006
- ECtHR, Case of Bowman v. the United Kingdom [GC], no. 24839/94, 19 February 1998
- ECtHR, Case of Feret v. Belgium, no. 15615/07, 10 October 2009
- ECtHR, Case of Lingens v. Austria, no. 9815/82, 8 July 1986
- ECtHR, Case of Nadtoka v. Russia, no. no. 38010/05, 31 May 2016
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