MEDIA AND ENVIRONMENTAL CASES IN ALBANIA
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Media reporting of five selected environmental cases

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
Albania, a country rich in energy resources, utilizes energy to uplift the economy and improve the well-being of its citizens. But in the last two decades, the exploitation and the pressure exerted on these resources has been increased. Meanwhile, the lack of transparency in decision-making and the lack of dialogue between the parties contribute to the escalation of conflicts between the stakeholders. The clash is being reflected in the media, which plays a primary role in reporting on environmental issues.

This analysis is an initiative of EcoAlbania that aims to evaluate media reports on a few selected environmental cases. It displays the frequency and the way in which the five most important environmental events of the last five years have been reported, driven either from the perspective of activism either from the perspective of ecological sustainability, supported by scientific groups but also by local communities, when they happen to consider the process of decision-making as detrimental to their own interests.

This analysis will evaluate the volume and the intensity of the coverage for each of the five cases considered; the comparison between the media outlets, within the framework of the characteristics of the Albanian media landscape. The following aspects will be more specifically addressed: the positioning of the environmental news (in comparison to other news), the available time, the space and the scientific depth of the treatment of these issues in the newsroom.

Besides the main task of evaluating the media coverage of environmental issues, the analysis serves as a source of environmental information to the general public. It also includes some illustrative photographs, that help to better document the environmental impact of these development projects through a visual perspective.

The data collection and analysis were conducted in two phases. In the first one (September 2018 - January 2019) the preparation of the draft report took place, whereas in the second one (January 2019 - August 2019), it was presented in five cities (Elbasan, Fier, Tiranë, Vlorë and Kukës), where it was discussed with different interest groups.

In conclusion, the analysis recommends a number of measures that will help the publication of more environmental information, the enhancement of transparency and the quality of reporting by newsrooms, as a fundamental premise for the raising of environmental awareness among people.

Photo 1: © Artan Rama

In the center, part of Vjosa Valley that is expected to be flooded due to the construction of the Kalivac HPP.
2. INTRODUCTION
Since a long time ago the “convention” between humans and nature has changed. Nature is not only seen as a representation of beauty that satisfies the aesthetic tastes, that pleases the eye of a passionate and adventurous traveler, but also as a capital for the economic growth and prosperity of society. However, alongside development and especially, technological progress, concerns about its condition are being raised. Crucial issues such as deforestation, reduction of wildlife, pollution, scarcity of resources, rising carbon emissions, global warming and climate change due to human activity, are constraining the rate of exploitation and the intensity of resource usage. Under these conditions, the environmental decision-making must be implemented within the boundaries of sustainable development. It is not an issue of governments or international financial consortiums, but of a wider interest and responsibility. Thus, this concern, or this situation that is gaining growing popularity, requires also, a new perspective on media reporting.

Issues such as: can the media contribute to the reduction of the impact of industrial activity on the environment; how to detach it from the financial dependency by corporations; which are its capacities; how can it be restructured for more environmental vigilance; should it spend new energy on environmental crime reporting; has it failed to report on the state of the environment; to what degree should the exploitation of natural resources be extended; is science part of media reporting; how can we develop by rationalizing the use of natural resources; how can we foster a greater environmental awareness?

These are parts of a joint communication plan in the name of a greater awareness, to avoid the devastation of the environment, the depletion of natural resources and secure a future for the country.

A former socialist country, Albania went bankrupt around thirty years ago. In conditions of extreme poverty, it chose the model of market economy, but through an old and hasty way. Thus, the overexploitation of natural resources was massively seen as a way to combat poverty. But, with a poor administration, incomplete and non updated legislation, and without a monitoring authority, sustainable planning and development became impossible.

Demographic movements towards the lowlands created an urban chaos. The new residents needed wood material, inert or stones to build their houses. Thus, the exploitation of forests, riverbeds, and mountain sites began. For nearly thirty years, hundreds of acres of high forest were destroyed1. Millions of m3 of river alluviums were eroded by inert processing plants, while newly opened quarries caused the disappearance of hundreds of hectares of vegetation. The lack of control led to pollution of water, air and the growth of urban waste. Chaos also affected the coastline. Hundreds of dams were built in an amateurish way to stop marine erosion. Lawlessness prevailed everywhere. Due to the lack of attention and the mismanagement of the plots and pastures, uncontrolled fires caused severe damages to even larger areas. The state of the environment deteriorated.

About ten years ago, only few months after the expressed enthusiasm by the government, that Albania could become a mini energy superpower in the Western Balkans region, the country’s public debt was slightly higher than half of its National Product’s (GDP)2. Under these circumstances, the country needed an alternative development approach to serve

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1 INSTAT, 2017
2 Open Data – Albania, 2017
two purposes: debt reduction and poverty reduction. But economic development was limited. Energy security was one of the causes, which was conditioned by at least two factors: the amount of rainfall and the import of energy. Thus, the decision makers came to an operational conclusion: lowering imports would increase energy security, which would reduce financial pressure on the budget and create favorable conditions, among other measures, to attract large investments, by bringing economic growth. Almost 100% of the electricity was coming from hydropower sources. For this reason, increasing the installed capacity of water sources was the main mean of achieving the necessary energy security. At this moment, the country’s natural wealth and environment had become a political issue.

Investment and resource utilization would, as never before, be the capital that would produce good for the growth of the welfare and national economy.

The World Bank accepted this argument. Joint teams began working to put this into practice. Experts returned to studies conducted years ago and confirmed that Albania had a high, still unexploited, hydropower energy potential.

In the context of climate change concerns and rising global temperatures, renewable energy production seemed attractive and this approach, highly ecological.

The environmental legislation was reviewed (by signing the «Stabilization and Association Agreement» with the European Community and their member states in 2006, «Albania had accepted co-operation to contribute to a sustainable...
economic development\textsuperscript{3}. Laws were drafted in accordance with European Union Acts (Acquis). Sectoral and national environmental plans were developed. In 2000, Albania ratified the Aarhus Convention\textsuperscript{4}, which is the most reforming convention on the public’s right information on environmental issues. For two decades, Albania has become a member of almost all environmental conventions, protocols and other international agreements. Finally, it ratified the «Paris Agreement»\textsuperscript{6} (September 2016), which is the most important agreement on combating global warming, (although, Albania has not yet submitted a national climate strategy according to its obligations). Further, many departments were re-organized and new state environmental agencies were established.

But the authorities pledged support for investments and investors and created the proper legal spaces to attract them. The law on concessions\textsuperscript{6} was amended and many decisions and acts were announced in line with the new development objectives. A new form of collaboration, unknown before, called the Public Private Partnership (PPP), became the locomotive of the economy. The government provided the resource and the private, the service. The benefit would be mutual. Initially, this partnership was allowed for 20 years, then for 35 years and in special cases, through legislative procedures by special laws and acts, for 99 years. The basic law on concessions of 2006, changed again and is the most amended law, which changes almost every year in favor of the investors.

Except of the water resources, the authorities started to think about the mineral resources. As a mountainous

\textsuperscript{3} (Kuvendi Popullor i Republikës së Shqipërisë, 2006)
\textsuperscript{4} (Ministria e Turizmit dhe Mjedisit, 1998)
\textsuperscript{5} (Kuvendi Popullor i Republikës së Shqipërisë, 2016)
\textsuperscript{6} (Agjencia e Prokurimit Publik, 2009)
country, Albania has a rich geological structure. Thus, new strategies were developed and exploitation permits increased. Mining activity was seen as an opportunity to attract foreign investors and support European industry with raw materials.

Albania adopted international transparency documents in the field of resource utilization and set clear rules for the conduct of mining activity. However, along with exploitation, started the de-vegetation of mountainous sites.

Although in 2013, the Berisha government was replaced by the Rama government, the pressure on natural resources was the same. The new government maintained the same development objectives through the extensive use of natural resources. Another decision-making act provoked a new conflict. In 2014, when part of urban waste landfills did not fulfill environmental and health standards, when segregation was not applied and the recycling industry was going bankrupt, the authorities, without any consultation before with the stakeholders, promoted waste incineration. The government spent millions of euros to support the financing of concessions for the construction of the first two incinerators (then, a third was also approved).

It did not follow the current integrated waste management strategy it had adopted and a new concept on waste treatment was legitimized. This kind of euphoria also affected the Protected Areas. The Karavasta and Narta lagoons, two important national wetlands, also protected by international conventions, were planned for mass resorts.

Today, the data show that public debt has increased by about 70% of GDP. The national forest volume has been reduced, and not only the main streams, but almost all river branches, are planned to be diverted from the development of hydropower stations, while energy security is insufficient, as long as energy production depends on the amount of rainfall. Moreover, although in 2017, total installed power exceeded 2000 MW, the growing economy had additional energy needs. According to the World Bank, Albania’s natural resource income in GDP has the highest percentage, compared to natural resource income in GDP of other Western Balkan countries. But the financial value spent on environmental services ranked Albania in the last place. Overuse and misuse of resources has fueled social conflicts between concession users and residents living near these sources. Some of them, supported by civil society, have appealed to the court, others have publicly protested, promoting a new environmental activism. Environmental organizations, on the other hand, have increased expertise and their efforts to help the residents.

7 (EITI, 2010)
8 (MABETEX GROUP, 2017)
9 (Banka Botërore, 2018)
10 (Enti Rregullator i Energjisë, 2017)
Photo 2: © Artan Rama

View from “Rruga e Kombit” (Nation’s Highway). In the background, Munella Mountain.
METHODOLOGY

3.1 CASES TAKEN IN ANALYSIS
The analysis relied on information published in the media in the form of written articles, videos and photos for each environmental case, including all genres of media reporting: daily news, more specified articles, researching studies, analysis, reportages, data statistics; information published by individuals, interest groups, representatives or community members, such as press releases, statements or reactions on social networks.

Data from two main sources were used: online portals and television channels. In Albania there are no complete data on preferred media categories as primary sources of information, however there is an increasing tendency of informing by online portals, although their reliability is low in comparison with the traditional media (tv and press).11

Initially, a wider number of media sources was selected. But during the data collection, some of them resulted without any information on the environmental issues taken into consideration. Thus, part of the final elaboration and analysis remained the media, that not only reported on the issues in question, but also combined some distinguishing features: the time length in the media market, the original source of reporting form (press, tv), the weight of environmental news in newsroom, news production costs, the portal’s profile; whereas from the traditional media, only national public television stations were selected.

The information collected was subjected to integrated processing. It was classified according to the topic, gender and origin of media information. Subsequently, it was followed by the creation of tables, the creation of datasets, the organization of statistical data, that enabled further refinement, assisted by some indicators, such as reporting frequency, depth, degree of involvement of interest groups, and the journalists’ proximity with the location. The combination of these results helped us to perform the final analysis.

Even more, in order to gain a greater understanding and to confront some of the findings of this analysis, live interviews were conducted with newsroom executives (with four public television stations), and direct interviews were held with journalists that had reported on environmental issues.

Data collection and processing took place over a four-month period (September 2018 - January 2109) and focused on five selected environmental issues reported over the last five years, although the background of the events refers to the two past decades.
This analysis examined five well-known environmental issues, behind which were mainly concessionary contracts for the use of natural resources based on Public Private Partnership (PPP) practices. They are:

2. Conflict between residents and concessionaire for forest use on the White Mountain in Fushë-Bulqizë.
3. Concessions for the erection of incinerators in Tirana, Elbasan and Fier.
4. Construction of a large tourist resort in Divjaka-Karavasta National Park by Mabtex Group, an international construction corporation.
5. Joint national and international scientific and other stakeholder efforts to halt the establishment of hydropower plants on the Vjosa River, as the only free flowing river in Europe.

The selection of issues was the result of environmental impact assessment, ecological importance of the ecosystem, degree of protection, involvement in networks of international environmental organizations or conventions, degree of involvement of stakeholders, proportions of conflict among developers and local residents as well as their level of media coverage.
4. PRESENTATION OF THE CASES

4.1 THE HYDROPOWER PLANTS ON THE VALBONA RIVER
   4.1.1 BACKGROUND
   4.1.2 MEDIA COVERAGE

4.2 UTILIZATION OF THE FOREST ON MALI I BARDHË (WHITE MOUNTAIN)
   4.2.1 HISTORY
   4.2.2 MEDIA COVERAGE

4.3 CONCESSIONAL AGREEMENTS FOR THE THREE INCENERATORS
   4.3.1 HISTORY
   4.3.2 MEDIA COVERAGE

4.4 THE MABETEX GROUP RESORT IN THE DIVVJAKË-KARAVASTA PARK
   4.4.1 HISTORY
   4.4.2 MEDIA COVERAGE

4.5 THE ENDEAVOR TO PROHIBIT DAM BUILDING IN THE VJOSË RIVER
   4.5.1 BACKGROUND
   4.5.2 MEDIA COVERAGE
4.1 THE HYDROPOWER PLANTS ON THE VALBONA RIVER
4.1.1 BACKGROUND

On January 29, 2009, a contract for the construction of a small hydropower plant (T-plan) - the first on the Valbona River, within the legally protected from interference National Park - was signed between a concession company and the authorities of the Ministry of Infrastructure and Energy. The receiving dam would be built at a quota of 865 m a.s.l., with a capacity of 2.3 MW.

In July 2009, a new contract with another concessionaire was signed, which was subsequently modified by two amendments in favor of the concessionaire. When work began in 2017, it was revealed that two hydropower plants were to be built (both in a protected area), each with a receiving dam of different quotas: Dragobi, at 1112 m a.s.l. and Çeremi at 670 m a.s.l., with a combined power of 21.9 MW.

But in 2017, the National Agency of Natural Resources (AKBN) approved another implementation plan for a new concession contract in favor of “Valbona Project Company”, signed in August 2013. It was about building a cascade of three small HPPs and only one of them, “Valbona 1”, with a power of 25.5 MW, almost the capacity of the three previously approved hydropower plants, would be located within the protected area.

Thus, in just ten years, over the rivers of Valbonë and the Çerem, we have 14 hydropower plants approved through three concession contracts for a thirty-five year period. All of them, situated within a protected area.

Specifically:

1. A contract between the MIE (Ministry of Infrastructure and Energy) and T-plan for the construction of one HPP.
2. A contract between the MIE and “Dragobia Energy” for the construction of 2 HPPs.
3. A contract between the MIE and “Valbona Project Company” for the construction of 11 HPPs.
The “harassment” of Valbona, one of the cleanest and fastest flowing rivers of the Albanian Alps, caused a reaction in the Valley. Initially, the community protested by confronting the company representatives at the construction site. Subsequently, protests took place in Tirana, with the participation of a larger group of people, which led to the involvement of the broader public opinion. All this reaction was covered by the media.

4.1.2 MEDIA COVERAGE

Although the number of foreign visitors to Valbona is relatively high, the issue of hydropower construction was largely covered by the local media and only by a few foreign media. Despite the fact that the decision for the building of the plants was taken during the 2009-2013 period, the matter “exploded” in the media only in September 2016, when their construction began.

The monitoring conducted during this period on nationwide TV channels, showed that initially (at least in the first three or four days) none of them reported the news. At this time another environmental issue was in the center of public attention: the import of green waste. Undoubtedly, this made it easier for the bulldozers to penetrate the Valbona Valley National Park. But later on, reporting on the progress of events in Valbona has been consistent throughout the years 2017 and 2018.

The monitoring of 9 online portals, has shown that there has been a decline in the number of articles on the Valbona situation over the years. Thus, there were...
75 articles in 2016 and 33 in 2018. Most of them (38) were published in “Shqiptarja.com”, but in 2018 only 2 articles appeared in the said portal. Since March 2018 no reporting whatsoever has been published by “Shqiptarja.com”. “Oranews.tv” follows with 20 articles, and thirdly “Reporter.al” (BIRN) with 17. However, only 2 of the articles by “Oranews.tv” are authored, while in the case of “Reporter.al” all of them are authored. Regarding the proximity to the site, none of the reports by “Oranews.tv” were a product on-the-scene reporting, while at “Reporter.al” only 2 such reports were published.

Concerning the authorship of the articles, the general data show that 4 out of 5 articles are unauthored. But in-depth articles and reports from the scene are in their entirety authored. On the other hand, in every 5 authored articles, in only one of them can the presence of the journalist on the field be confirmed. The data show that out of 128 unauthored reports (158 in total) only 9 of them arrived from the field, none from the scene of events and none of them was in-depth. “Voice of America” (VOA) and “Reporter.al” are the media that have reported the most from the field and all of their reports are authored.

The latest reporting from the scene belongs to “Top Channel” TV, in September 2018.

4.2 UTILIZATION OF THE FOREST ON MALI I BARDHË (WHITE MOUNTAIN)
4.2.1 HISTORY

At the beginning of 2015, the government granted through auction, a timber harvesting right for the forest land of “Sheshe Bulqizë” to three private companies specialized in wood processing. 40,000 m³ of mainly beech wood, would be utilized for a ten year period. The intervention would affect approximately 7000 ha. But the residents of three villages in the Bulqizë
district (Dushaj, Koçaj and Kodra e Danit), to which the plots belonged, were notified five months later, when heavy machinery for the building of mountain roads appeared near the forest entrance.

They reacted by preventing the beginning of the works. The conflict escalated over the next three years. Clashes broke out between them and the company representatives and the workers were compelled to stop work. The locals even set an excavator belonging to the company on fire. The police arrested some of them and soon after released them. But the protests continued and this time they were led by their wives.

The Municipality of Bulqizë tried to start negotiations intending to resolve the issue, but the agreement was rejected as unilateral in favor of the concessionaire. The villagers claimed that hidden ties and political interests were concealing behind the concessionaires. The protests of the residents of Sheshe Bulqizë gained new prominence. Broadcasting on national television platforms gave them a new impetus. Social networks promoted them massively.

Encouraged, they were organized and assigned the issue to several teams of local experts. Under these conditions, the authorities gathered to assess the situation. The Environmental Inspectorate swung into action. It was revealed that the concession company had breached the deadlines during the technical implementation of the project.

Environment and tourism Minister Blendi Klosi used the irregularities observed during the implementation of the contract to mitigate the anger of the residents and suspended the contract. Every action has been suspended, though the contract is still in effect.

4.2.2 MEDIA COVERAGE

Two local media outlets were also included in the reporting of the issue of forest use on the Mali I Bardhë in Fushë-Bulqizë: “TV Bulqiza” and “Bulqiza ime.al”. They regarded the issue as a conflict between the parties. An approach that served as a model of treatment by other media, including national television.

3 out of 8 articles were contributed by local journalists. Although it was portrayed as a conflict between the parties, the issue was also covered by “Reporter.al” (BIRN), which reported on it 7 times. But, though a national-level newsroom, BIRN addressed the problem from a local perspective, unlike the case of MABETEX resort in Divjaka Park (to be dealt with below), where BIRN treated the Park as a national treasure, albeit the locals there, supported the company and not the conservation of the National Park. The Divjaka case, was reported 7 times by BIRN, but the articles were contributed by 5 different authors. While on the issue of forest use in Bulqizë, 5 out of BIRN’s 7 articles were written by the same journalist who lived in Bulqizë and reported for the local media.

July 21, 2018 marked the highest number of reports. On this day, Environment Minister Blendi Klosi, met with the residents in Sheshe-Bulqizë and announced the suspension of the company’s activity. The news was transmitted by almost all the media. The material was distributed, mainly by the public relations office of the Ministry of Tourism and the Environment. On the same day, the Minister appeared also in the main edition of Klan TV, as well as in the noon edition of “Vision Plus”. Thus, in addition to reporting the good news, he received credit for the suspension of
the contract. The monitoring conducted through the central editions of four of the nationwide channels (“RTSH”, “Tv Klan”, “Vision Plus” and “Top Channel”) in the second ten days of July 2018, showed that none of them had reported until then on the issue of forest use in Fushë-Bulqizë.

Although there was talk of the forest values and the diversity of the landscape, only one video showed footage from the forest in question.

4.3 CONCESSIONAL AGREEMENTS FOR THE THREE INCENERATORS

4.3.1 HISTORY

Two years later, in 2016, the government approved a second incinerator, this time in the city of Fier, through a similar contract but costing five more million euros. But in addition to the disturbance caused to the public by the investment of about 50 million euros for transporting the waste to the incinerator, when in the first place, 

Over the last decade, the amount of urban waste in Albania has been doubled, but still 70% of it is getting buried. There are no proper landfills and Tirana, the capital of the country, is in the last few months, in the process of rehabilitating its landfill “Sharra”, which has been contaminated for years. Source separation of waste is almost nonexistent, and the recycling level is low. But although the National Waste Strategy was adopted in 2011 and incineration, controlled combustion, was classified at the bottom of the urban waste management hierarchy, in December 2014 the government decided the opposite. It invested 22 million euros for the construction of a waste incinerator in the city of Elbasan. It signed a conventional PPP concession agreement with a newly established company that possessed no experience in the field of waste management.
the weight of the waste was not accurately known, and secondly, the lack of partition at source, which made the incineration a quick, but not smart method, and thirdly, when the domestic recycling industry went bankrupt, another issue was was coming to light: the concession companies that would build the incinerators had the same shareholders and shared joint business.

In 2017, at the end of its mandate, the government approved another incinerator in Tirana, with a burning capacity of twice the incinerator of Elbasan and Fier, taken together and with a total cost of about 130 million euros. The contract\textsuperscript{14} was of the same format as the previous two. However, some points, such as securing the minimum amount of waste by the municipalities, or the obligation of the local units to deliver their urban waste to combustion plants, suggested a favorable contract in the interest of the concessionaire. But even though the investment would be entirely private, the shareholders were again the same or their associates. The shareholders and the company that would build the Tirana incinerator were registered in Amsterdam, Netherlands. It is well known that Holland, a haven for offshore companies, does not allow the publication of the shareholders names. This contributed in the growing mystery of the case and therefore of the popular anger.

In a few months, thanks to financial operations and schemes, some undercover and some taking place in the open, tampering with company addresses and transfers or capital concentration, within a small circle of confidants, a small group of people ascended to the true heavens of success. The failure of waste management policies that turned the entire integrated management pyramid upside down, boosted highly suspect profiting activities.

4.3.2 MEDIA COVERAGE

It took two years, since the first incinerator was approved in Elbasan, for the issue to receive media attention. The construction of one incinerator, all the more so in a city with a considerable industrial heritage, was considered necessary by the public, but three were considered too many. Especially since they were under the ownership of the same small group of people, with family ties between them. During the study period, 160 articles were identified in the ten selected portals, reported mainly from December 2016 to December 2018.

During this period the number of articles progressively increased: 10 were published in the last three months of 2016, 44 in 2017, 110 in 2018 and only 1 in January 2019. In the case of incinerators we

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|}
\hline
\textbf{INCINERATORS} & \textbf{the flow of reporting} \\
(December 2016- December 2018) & \\
\hline
Newsroom & No \\
Shekulli & 53 \\
Citizens Channel & 8 \\
Reporter.al (BIRN) & 8 \\
Porta Vendore.al & 4 \\
Lapsi.al & 22 \\
Exit.al & 14 \\
VOA & 2 \\
Shqiptarja.com & 19 \\
Gazeta Tema & 10 \\
Ora News & 8 \\
Gazeta Shqiptare Online & 5 \\
Revista Monitor & 13 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Reporting flow by editorial office}
\end{table}

\textsuperscript{14} (INSTAT, 2017)
also evaluated the reports of two new portals: “Citizens-Channel” and “Porta Vendore”, which have shown consistency in reporting environmental issues.

The largest number of articles were published by “Shekulli” (53), followed by “Lapsi.al” with 22, “Shqiptarja.com” with 19 and “Exit.al” with 14. Although “Shekulli” reported more, equal to one third of the total, only 1 was in-depth reporting, while the articles of “Lapsi.al” were unauthored and none of the reports was from the scene. Investigations reported at “Lapsi.al” do not belong to the editorial board, but were picked up from other newsrooms.

“Exit.al” had 5 investigations, 4 of which belonged to it and 3 of them were authored. “Shqiptarja.com” had 1 in-depth news story and no author. The articles of “Porta Vendore.al” were all authored, although they were few in number due to the relatively short period this newsroom was active. “Monitor”, a journal specializing in economic and financial news, provided exclusive reports on the capacities and money spent on the construction of the incinerators, applying data journalism methods. But out of the total 13 articles, only 1 was authored. The “Monitor” reports reflected, mainly, ready-made financial tables.

The last ten days of January 2018 were the busiest, which coincided with a protest held by the residents of Verri, in Fier, who opposed the building of the incinerator. It was reported 33 times, of which 21 times, in just two days. Almost all of the news covered the protests and backlashes, while only one was in-depth.

If we were to classify them by reporting themes: corruption, money mismanagement; pollution; monopoly; waste import; the media showed a higher sensitivity to the topic of pollution and mismanagement (Fig. 2).

The reports involved 11 politicians, 6 activists and 5 experts.

We reviewed all the investigations and analyses and after grouping them according to the hypotheses raised, we compared them to one another to find out which of the hypotheses was the most reported. The results are shown in the graph below.

![Graph showing the most reported hypotheses]

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If we were to classify them by reporting themes: corruption, money mismanagement; pollution; monopoly; waste import; the media showed a higher sensitivity to the topic of pollution and mismanagement (Fig. 2).

The reports involved 11 politicians, 6 activists and 5 experts.

We reviewed all the investigations and analyses and after grouping them according to the hypotheses raised, we compared them to one another to find out which of the hypotheses was the most reported. The results are shown in the graph below.

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![Graph showing the most reported hypotheses]
In March 2017, the Ministry of Environment announced that a public hearing would be held. The announcement was routinely published on its website. But it was soon noticed that it was not a usual announcement. It concerned the initiative of the Mabetex Group, an international construction consortium, specializing in large civil engineering projects, proposing the construction of a massive tourism structure: Divjaka Resort in the Divjakë-Karavasta Park, mainly along the slopes of Divjaka Beach. Although the announcement was unexpected, the alarming fact was that part of the resort would be built within the protected area of the Park, very near the Karavasta Lagoon.

Karavasta is a wetland of international importance. The Dalmatian Pelican (Pelecanus Crispus) nests in the Karavasta Lagoon. Also the only heron colony in Albania, is located there.

The lagoon serves as a shelter for about 90 species. Around the lagoon, the only herd of wild water buffaloes in the country grazes. Karavasta is protected by several environmental conventions. Thanks to it, Albania was included under the Ramsar Convention. Karavasta is part of the Emerald Network and one of the important crossing corridors for the migrating birds of the Eastern Adriatic. Karavasta Lagoon is the focal point of the National Park that was announced in 2007, with a total area of 22,230 ha.

The announcement sparked the reaction of interest groups. Twelve environmental associations responded with a common approach: the resort was in conflict with the legislation and management plans designed in accordance with the requirements of such a protected area.
But there was also an international reaction. The Mediterranean Wetlands Alliance\(^{18}\), a consortium of research organizations for the protection of the Mediterranean lagoons, contacted the Albanian government and the Ministry of Environment, expressing its concern over the development of the resort and its negative impact on the natural heritage of the Divjakë-Karavasta Park. According to the Alliance, the Karavasta Lagoon is one of the two most important wetlands of the Adriatic Basin. It is visited every year by millions of migratory birds. In conclusion, the Alliance considered the initiative to build the resort, but also the attitude of the Albanian government as unacceptable and demanded the cancellation of this dangerous project.

During this whole period, the Ministry of Environment\(^{19}\) maintained a neutral, but unjust attitude. It tried to pass on the responsibility to the interest groups by abandoning the institutional obligations. It kept silent about a series of violations. By accepting the public hearing, it enabled the company to legitimize the process. The Law “On Protected Areas”\(^{20}\) did not allow the use of the land with the intensity predicted by the implementation of this project. According to the technical report, the project envisaged the building of dozens of villas and hundreds of apartments. An investment of $1.5 billion, with an estimated construction area of 893,638 m\(^2\).

The central authorities did not demonstrate the needed transparency towards a growing public interest and this provoked responses additional to the views of environmental organizations. Various civil society activists raised their voices publicly against the construction of the resort. Finding themselves under an unforeseen pressure, the authorities backed down. Silently, the process was suspended. Meanwhile, the company has applied again, but the details of the project have not yet been published.

### 4.4.2 MEDIA COVERAGE

The “Mabetex Group’s” initiative for the construction of a tourist resort in the Divjakë-Karavasta National Park, along with the issue of forest use at Mali I Bardhë in Fushë-Bulqizë, although having the lowest number of reports, are two won issues, or at least suspended, for the time being. The debate on the building of the resort in Divjakë introduced the largest number of environmental experts to the public discourse. Unlike the other cases taken into consideration, in the case of the resort, a senior environmental administration official, namely the Director of the Administration of Protected Areas in Fier, publicly opposed the official decision that supported the building of the resort.

Unlike the residents of Fushë-Bulqizë, who opposed the concessionaire, the locals of Divjakë were pro-in favor of the building. But experts argued that the political decision-making should not ignore the fact that Divjakë Park is of national and international importance.

“Exit.al” and “Reporter.al” (BIRN) reported the most articles and the number of in-depth articles on these two portals is higher than simple reporting or feedback from the parties. Almost all reports are authored and belong to all reporting genres. While the reports of “Shqiptarja.com”, 7 in total, were unauthored. They were all received notifications or separate reactions from the parties.

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18 Aleanca Mesdhetare e Ligatinave - https://medwet.org/
May 2017 marked the highest number of public activities related to the debate on the development of the tourist resort: public hearings for the residents, reactions by the environmental organizations, reactions of foreign representations in Albania and international organizations. Also, the Law on Protected Areas was passed. However, none of these activities were covered on any of the nationwide television channels.

4.5 THE ENDEAVOR TO PROHIBIT DAM BUILDING IN THE VJOSË RIVER

4.5.1 BACKGROUND

In 2009 the Albanian government commissioned a study to analyze potential schemes for exploiting the Vjosa River’s hydropower potential. The study was carried out by the French studio Sogreah, with funding from the World Bank and envisioned the construction of 25 hydropower plants in Vjosa. In 2014, the Albanian government decided to implement the plan for the building of at least eight of them, starting downstream, beyond Kalivac, in Poçem. Two Turkish companies submitted the proposal to build a hydropower plant in Vjosë. It was about the Poçem hydropower plant, intended to be built in the main-river flow.

Before the public announcement for the launching of the tender, the Ministry of Environment provided the Environmental Declaration to the Turkish companies. Experts and environmental activists were mobilized. The first controversies emerged. Since it was an election period, the prime minister took advantage of the moment and promised that he would not allow the construction of the dams on Vjosë. But immediately after the elections, he changed his position and supported the companies by granting them exclusive bonuses during the tender for acquiring the right to build the

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Photo 8: © Artan Rama

West wing of the foundation of the Kalivac Dam (Vjosë)

22 RiverWatch - https://riverwatch.eu/
hydropower plant.

In October 2016, the government signed a contract\(^{21}\) for the construction of the Poçem hydropower plant with the merger of two Turkish operators. As a result, the responses of civil society and interest groups that demanded a river without dams, were increased. About thirty Albanian and European scientists (Austria, Germany) and some international environmental organizations, such as RiverWatch\(^{22}\) and EuroNatur\(^{23}\), visited the area in 2017, intending to bring to the public’s attention the damages that dams could cause to river systems similar to the Vjosa ecosystem. Vjosa is one of the seven most important rivers in the country and the largest river of southern Albania. Along its course, the riverbed extends several times through the wonderful valleys and cliffs that form a wild and unique landscape. Preliminary studies showed a high biodiversity. Scientists praised Vjosa as the only great wild river still untouched in Europe (except Russia). According to them, it constituted an exemplary system and should be protected as a nature lab of paramount pan-European importance. They estimated that if the dam was to be built, the damage for the river would be irreversible.

The team reviewed the documentation for the assessment of the environmental impact of the project and concluded that 60% of the material was copied from other studies referring to different river ecosystems. Data on Flora and Fauna in the EIA were missing. Finally, they asked the government for a three-year moratorium to prevent dams from being built on Vjosa until complete hydrological, morphological and ecological assessments were carried out, which should include the design of a new environmental assessment, according to EU standards.

On the other hand, 38 residents of the village of Kutë, near the site where the dam was to be built, supported by EcoAlbania, a local environmental activism organization, filed a lawsuit against the contractual parties. They requested from the Court the absolute invalidity of the contract and the suspension of its enforcement. In May 2017, the court ruled in their favor and deemed the contract invalid.

Vjosa’s case marked another victory internationally: thanks to the joint efforts of RiverWatch, EuroNatur and EcoAlbania, three environmental activism organizations that defend rivers from dam building, Vjosa was excluded from the EU Hydro Master Plan\(^{24}\), which provided support for the construction of a number of hydropower stations in the Western Balkans. But despite the public reaction to the dam construction in Vjosa, the Albanian government did not change its attitude towards policies for the so-called “energy security”, which supposedly is urgently needed for the country. A month after the court’s decision regarding Poçem was announced, the government launched the procedures for a tender concerning a new hydropower plant, in Kalivaç, which had been suspended for years due to financial problems of the first concessionaire. The government intervened and eventually, in 2017, passed it to a new concessionaire: one of the Turkish companies\(^{25}\) who had lost the case for the Poçem hydropower plant in court. This decision was a bolt from the blue for the environmental activists.

The Bern Convention\(^ {26}\) (International Conservation Treaty) reacted immediately. In the summer of 2018, a delegation landed...
on the ground in a three-day trip, which included a visit to Vjosa, to the spot where the riverbed was endangered by the dams. Following the drafting of a report, the Convention, in its annual revision on 29 November 2018, after expressing a deep concern for the environmental situation in Albania, called for the suspension of the construction of the two hydropower plants: Poçem and Kalivaç. Through its permanent representatives in our country, on November 29, 2018, it delivered to the government twelve necessary recommendations in case the Kalivaç dam was going to be built.

On December 6, in Tirana, scientists published the research results on the biodiversity and ecology of the Vjosa River. The findings were presented in the presence of the authorities of the Ministry of the Environment, with the latter promising to take them into account. Almost at the same time that the European Parliament adopted the resolution on Albania, where among other things, notifies the Albanian government and the European Commission its deep concern over some economic projects that are damaging the protected areas. The Vjosa river is mentioned in the resolution.

The Parliament recommends that Albania should review the renewable energy strategy and reduce the dependence of electricity production on hydropower plants.

4.5.2 MEDIA COVERAGE

The anti-dam struggle has combined the efforts of ecologists, environmental organizations and some European Union political institutions. Thanks to this joint contribution, Vjosa gained international recognition. Thus, the case recorded the highest number of articles (344 in print and video) compared to the other issues considered in the study.

The coverage expends on a 4-year period (2015, 2016, 2017, 2018). Most reports were recorded in 2016 and 2017: 110 and

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The massive dynamism of the reports reflected the intensity of the events on the ground. Thus, in 2017, the Administrative Court determined the absolute illegality of the concession contract for the construction of the Poçem hydropower plant. The tender for the Kalivac Dam was announced by the Ministry of Energy. European scientists arrived in Vjosa, with the support of RiverWatch and EuroNatur.

While in 2018, the number of reports decreased. Thus, in every three articles reported for Vjosa in 2017, in 2018 only one was reported. Some media no longer reported, while Reporter.al (BIRN) showed consistency. “Porta Vendore.al”, a portal established in 2018, began reporting regularly on the dams of Vjosa.

60 foreign and 80 Albanian media outlets were involved. It was noted that the majority of Albanian reports were unauthored (12 in every 13 reports), while in the case of foreign media it was the opposite: the number of authored reports was higher than the unauthored ones (two out of three). Compared to each other, foreign authored articles were 8 times higher than the respective Albanian ones.

The most important event is the ascertainment of the illegality of the Poçem concession by the Administrative Court of Tirana on 2 May 2017, the day which marked the highest number of reports: 27 in total. In the case of Vjosë, over a period of about four years, “Top Channel” has reported 21 times (central edition), while other national televisions show a low reporting rate (3 times for RTSH, 3 times for «Klan Tv» and only 2 for «Vision Plus»).

“BIRN” recorded the highest number of reports on Vjosë, with 25. It is the only media outlet that has conducted in-depth reporting, not only in the case of Vjosa, but also on Valbona or on the protest of the residents of Fushë-Bulqizë for the forest use in Mali I Bardhë.

![Image 5: Dynamics of reporting on the Vjosa issue over a four-year period](image)

![Photo 9: White Water Lily. Protected landscape “Buna – Velipojë River”](photo)
5. MEDIA CONTROL ANALYSIS

5.1 THE WEIGHT OF ENVIRONMENTAL NEWS IN THE EDITORIALS

5.2 THE MEDIA’S CAPACITY IN REPORTING ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES
5. MEDIA CONTROL ANALYSIS
5.1 THE WEIGHT OF ENVIRONMENTAL NEWS IN THE EDITORIALS

Despite the size of a newsroom, environmental issues are in the vast majority of cases treated as trivial. The related information is mostly provided by district correspondents or it reaches the audience indirectly, in case it becomes part of the political debate. This relative neglect on behalf of the editorial teams, is an undeniable fact that directly contributes to the lack of information and discussion of the problems in the public sphere, and consequently to the inadequate environmental awareness of the community.

The monitoring of main newscasts on nationwide broadcasting networks has shown that over the past year (2018), the environmental reports occupied the last news category. According to the surveys carried out, combined with direct interviews with editors-in-chief, there is not one journalist dedicated to the reporting of environmental issues in any of the national television channels; there is not one programme dedicated to the environment, even in RTSh (Albanian Radio-Television), the only public TV network in the country. According to this observation (by monitoring the main broadcast editions that are regularly published on YouTube), the newsrooms do not spend more time, even if environmental issues open the central news edition. Reporting is largely based on local correspondents outside the capital, or when it is done by the newsrooms, usually information is drawn from official sources. This is firstly related to the general culture of reporting in Albania and to a social tradition of the consummation of public announcements.

Secondly, it is related to the dominant structuralism under which the media functions, not only at a national, but also at a regional level. Thus, the majority of shareholders owning the media market, receive public funds through participating in several public tenders through other companies owned by them. Some of these companies, exploit the raw materials they acquire through the usage of natural resources of the country. Under these conditions, editorial independence to report or combat environmental crime, remains suspicious. In Albania, newscasts are paid by shareholders and the information department is still dependent on the promotion and advertising department. The financial dependence of journalists on the revenues provided by the television as a business, undoubtedly undermines their editorial independence. For this reason, it is difficult to conduct a coherent reporting, which often, when it comes to issues with a high public sensitivity, is shaky and fragile.

Thus, in one case, during the reporting on the situation due to the construction of the HPPs in Valbonë, the editorial office of a national media, attempted to present the situation as a conflict between the opposing sides, motivated by personal intentions and gain, rather than as a matter of public interest. A year later, the same media, held another stance, broadcasting visual findings from the destruction of the same Park by these hydropower stations. Other media profited from advertisements that promoted the advantages of urban waste incineration plants, which were so vehemently opposed by the environmental experts and the public opinion. The advertisements were funded by the concession company that would build the incinerators. In addition, some of these media stopped reporting on the concerns of the community and civil society. Moreover, some of them presented reportages in favor of the construction of the incinerators.
Another important factor, that reduces the space of environmental news, is the existence of a verbal agreement between the owners of national television channels not to attack each other’s businesses.

Reporting on environmental issues, requires time and effort. Meanwhile, the available funds for this type of reporting are diminishing. The lack of expertise limits the transmission of scientific information.

From this perspective, some new platforms are gaining popularity in reporting and denouncing environmental issues, breaking barriers and editorial restrictions, but meanwhile, in few cases the provided information has been incorrect, causing more confusion to the public opinion.

Reporting on environmental issues, research on resource utilization, requires time and understanding of the situations, but above all it requires money. Meanwhile, the funding available for these type of reporting is diminishing more and more. The lack of expertise limits the

5.2 THE MEDIA’S CAPACITY IN REPORTING ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

With few exceptions, environmental reporting remains superficial and fragmentary. There are at least two main consequences derived from this: failure to inform the public and lack of expertise; the second, so necessary in reporting and comprehending the environmental issues. Moreover, environmental reports appear sporadically in the media, and often they resemble to
the so-called “scandalous” news, following the model of the most-liked news, so similar with speculative journalism. Consequently, instead of enlightening the public mind, they seek to personalize the environmental problematic.

According to the research conducted on the media reports concerning the five cases taken into consideration, in the case of the legal struggle against the construction of the HPPs on Poçem and Valbonë, it was revealed that media coverage was largely absent throughout the whole process, except for the day of the court’s decision. Despite of the highest number of reports ever recorded in favor of an environmental case (27 in total) within a day, the information remained confusing and incomprehensible. The newsrooms reported the announcement of the decision in a superficial way. The majority of the reports, mainly presented by the portals, were referring to the same news. This was an expected outcome, since in lack of information flow, journalists relied only on the statements of the stakeholders or press releases.

Environmental reports also “suffer” from the lack of authorship. This absence is related to the fact that editorials, especially online portals “steal” each other’s news, but on the other hand, as long as these reports rely only on events, announcements, or public statements without deepening their research, the lack of authorship seems justified.

The lack of authorship in television broadcasted news is camouflaged. The usage of images gives the impression that we are dealing with different news. However, reporting on traditional media still maintains more credibility, especially on television channels, which have a generalist nature of programming, where reporting is not subjected to pressure “for the latest news”.

The number of experts in media reporting is low and as a consequence, the same persons are constantly involved. Such a limited selection (of persons with common attitudes and ascriptions expressed in common interviews) reflects the pressure and formality under which

![Image 6: Articles on Vjosa by authorship (local and foreign journalists)]
the news is produced, as well as the influence of the editorial staff on the work of journalists. The monitoring has shown that in every four articles, one of them was a press release provided by interest groups. Further research revealed the lack of visual evidence for the documentation of habitat degradation, an important component in the reporting of environmental crime. TV channels use old or archival filmic material. This is directly related to the financial constraints faced by editors and journalists during the news search process. According to the monitoring carried out during the reporting of environmental news by national televisions only for 2018, it was noticed that even in cases where reports on environmental issues had opened the central news editions, the cameras or the infrastructure of the broadcasting equipment was yet local, the same, and was in no case reinforced from the central editorial office.

During 2018, integrated waste management was at the center of public debate. “Top Channel” held the highest number of reports on the emergent situation at the landfill sites in Durres and Porto Romano. However, regarding the case of the Tirana incinerator, “Top Channel” transmitted only the official statements of Prime Minister Rama, that were in favor of the plant. It even aired a promotional news story for the Sharra incinerator, while the reactions of other groups of interest, mainly experts and environmental activists, were disregarded.

In order to understand how the media’s environmental approach has evolved after the publication of the cases in this study, we monitored the reports of the main national television channels for a period of four months (February, May, August and November), uniformly distributed before the publication peak of the five cases in 2016, and we compared them with the reports of the same channels in 2018, during the same months, when the reports were already beginning
to decrease. The subject of this observation concerns the main newscasts of four national TV channels: “RTSh”, “Top Channel”, “Tv Klan” and “Vizion Plus”. The results showed that the number of environmental reports increased by 35% in 2018. “Top Channel” had the highest number, which, during the last year, rose by 2.3 times.

It was also noted that the news reported by journalists, as compared to the news received by the press offices of public authorities, increased. But, in the same time, half of the environmental news were positioned in the last group of news editions, often even after sports news. It was also noted that in the category of environmental news positioned in the last group, none of them arrived from press offices. News of official origin was more commonly placed in the second group of the bulletin of the news edition, but never at the bottom.

The positioning of the environmental news, the origin and the lack of continuous follow-up show the powerlessness that journalists have towards the editorial office, while the behavior of the latter reflects its dependence by the shareholders.

But the “weakness” of the newsrooms causes another consequence. Under the pressure of production, they are often powerless against propaganda, which, through frequent reporting, manages to publish ready-made news prepared by the press offices of the institutions. On the other hand, research shows that so-called “environmental experts” through access to the media do not serve the public interest, but promote their personal interests. Thus, as long as environmental issues have a scientific character, they often remain incomprehensible and even worse, under pressure from production, reporters publish them in an unbalanced way.
6. RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A SUSTAINABLE REPORTING
6.2 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A TRANSPARENT DECISION WITH PARTIES
6.3 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PUBLIC RADIO TELEVISION (RTSh)
While the discussion on sustainable development contributes to an increase in the number of participants, the media should take on new responsibilities. They should not be limited to reporting official declarations and the official propaganda perspective, as this facade often serves not just for the covering of the truth, but it covers crime and corruption. The environment has nothing to do with history or ideology. The degradation of natural habitats is a national emergency. The debate on sustainable development is a political debate. Thus, media directors should raise the issue of using the country’s natural resources at the highest level of reporting. The media should create the needed space and give the environmental issue the necessary place. They have to do it consistently, comprehensively and courageously.

Given the premise that the media are the main instrument for shaping a public awareness of sustainable use of natural resources, we recommend these points in order to increase information, deepen reporting, a complete, clear and balanced picture of the environmental issues.

6.1 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A SUSTAINABLE REPORTING

The media should,

1. Develop training methods for the increasement of the capacities of journalists with scientific expertise on environmental issues.
2. Consider reporting environmental issues as a priority through the creation of editorial boards specialized on the reporting of sustainable development issues.
3. Reposition the “environmental news” by giving them priority over other news.
4. Sensitize the public on the miracles of nature and the potential of Albanian natural resources, through the realization of reportages, documentaries or promotional clips.
5. Increase the number of visual evidence of environmental degradation and display the physical condition of habitats.
6. Raise public awareness on cultivating the idea that natural resources can provide income through their conservation.
7. Promote authored articles and the ethics of reporting.
8. Increase the number of experts and ensure the participation of as many stakeholders as possible.
9. Avoid populist writings and evaluate the interests of the group in relation to the general interest.

6.2 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A TRANSPARENT DECISION WITH PARTIES

The Commissioner for the Right to Information and for Personal Data Protection should,

10. Encourage an investigation on the implementation of the Transparency Program in environmentally-friendly institutions to provide access to decision-making information related to the management of natural resources of the country.
11. Hold a roundtable with journalists and representatives of Civil Society (in the field of environmental and information law) with the aim of drafting a memorandum of cooperation between journalists and the Office of the Commissioner to support access to information on environmental decision-making.

6.3 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PUBLIC RADIO TELEVISION (RTSh)

RTSh should,

Establish the “Sustainable Development” editorial office to collect and process information related to exploitation but also conservation of natural resources and produce programs from all reporting genders.
7. CONCLUSIONS
The role of the media in public awareness places upon journalists the responsibility of forming a healthy public opinion on environmental issues.

But it is not an easy tusk for the media, considering that major TV newsrooms and a significant portion of web portals are funded mainly by shareholders whose businesses have an impact on the state of the environment.

An overview by “BIRN Albania” showed that the media ownership in Albania is being concentrated in the hands of politicians and industrialists. We call some of them oligarchs. And what is the goal of an oligarch? What is his ambition? Obviously, not the principles of journalism and neither sustainable development.

Another concern is the lack of information related to resource utilization. It has been noticed that with the rise of utilization intensity, the degree of transparency decreases. According to “Publeaks.al”, an information platform that registers public requests anonymously, almost all state institutions listed in its datasets during 2017-2018 (See column “Gjurmimi online”) refused to respond to the requests related to the use of natural resources or environmental issues.

Meanwhile, financial corporations and young tycoons are buying information by buying the media. The informational product is becoming more and more costly. What could be done? How should the journalists operate in such an environment? Certainly, a solution is not easy to find and the difficulties are increasing. But on the other hand, the resistance and the number of activists is growing. People are demanding to know what’s going on with the forests, rivers, with the air pollution. Decision-makers, administrators and elected officials are being subjected to pressure.

Under the motto: “Closer to the people, further away from power”, journalists’ efforts to adapt without surrendering their independence should not be abandoned.

30 (BIRN, 2018)
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MEDIA
DHE ÇËSHTJET
MJEDISORE NË SHQIPËRI