



Instituti Shqiptar i Medias  
Albanian Media Institute

Fondacioni Friedrich Ebert  
Friedrich Ebert Foundation



## **Annual EU Progress Report in the Albanian press - A qualitative analysis**

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### **I. Introduction**

On the 12<sup>th</sup> of October, 2011 the European Union published the annual progress report<sup>1</sup> for the Western Balkan. According to the Report, Albania was not ready to receive the candidate status, mainly due to the absence of institutional dialogue, political tension between the main political forces as well as the failure of institutions such as the Parliament and the judiciary, to achieve EU requirements. Even though the Report was only presented to the Albanian Parliament on 13 October, the Albanian press anticipated the negative outcome of the Report through a large number of pessimistic cover stories, starting from the 11 October.

The publication of the Report on the countries of the Western Balkans is an annual tradition of the European Union. In the past, every publication of the Report was followed by mutual accusations between the Albanian government and the opposition, whereby each party tried to assign the shortcomings and lack of progress to the opposite camp. In these contestations, the Albanian press has rarely remained neutral; instead, it has largely supported one political party or the other. This year coverage of the Report in the Albanian press has not changed radically from previous years. However, it can be noticed that there exists a broader consensus among all daily papers that the blame for the delay of Albania's integration process rests solely with the Albanian 'political class'.

This year, the press coverage of the Report differs from previous years due to various contextual factors: The first factor is the visa liberalization agreement between the EU and Albania in February 2011. In previous press coverage of EU progress reports, visa

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<sup>1</sup> Hereby referred to as 'the Report'.

liberalization was often interpreted as the main objective of European integration. In the light of visa liberalization, it remained to be seen whether the press would be still critical of the other unfulfilled criteria.

The second factor was the tense political situation in Albania following the event of 21 January. It was largely anticipated that the event of 21 January, which was followed by institutional deadlock and the parliamentary boycott of the opposition, would be a serious obstacle for Albania's progress to the EU. In the light of continuous political crisis since the 2009 general elections, the Report of this year was expected to give a 'final verdict' on the political actors' role in this crisis.

The last factor influencing the tone of press coverage of the Report concerns the regional dynamic. The progress made by other Western Balkans countries, such as Croatia and relatively Montenegro and Serbia towards the EU within the last year, would differentiate Albania from the rest of the region and re-group it with the 'laggards' of integration. In the light of this anticipated 'gap' between Albania and its Balkan neighbors, I expected that the press would heighten its critical tones towards the government as well as strengthen its nationalistic discourse.

Taking in consideration all these specific aspects of this year's publication of the Report, the main questions of this analysis are as follow: How does the Albanian press interpret the bilateral relations between Albania and the European Union? How does Albania fare in comparison to other countries in the region? What is the relationship between the elite, the political class and the government on one side and the citizens, the people and the nation on the other, reflected? Also, I ask whether the Albanian press gives an independent and neutral or critical and biased view of the Report. Finally, does the Albanian press prove to be capable of creating and stimulating a national debate concerning the European Union and the integration process? In other words, can the press be an agenda-setting actor regarding public and political debate on Albania's European integration?

## **II. Methodology of Research**

The analysis is a single case study. The research is based in one single event, which is the publication of the EU progress report of 2011 for the countries of the Western Balkans and its subsequent coverage in the Albanian press. For the purpose of this study, the 'event' is considered to take place starting from the second week of October till the end of November. In the context of this analysis, the 'Albanian press' is considered to be various things at

once: a medium of information, a public space and an independent and distinct actor—which is, distinct from other institutions or actors, such as the ‘political class’, the ‘elite’, the ‘judiciary’ etc. However, assuming that press has an independent agency, poses a number of difficult questions for us: is the ‘press’ the reporters who write in the daily news columns or the editors and the analysts? ‘Press’ consists of various actors and genres who structure news and events in different ways. Therefore, it becomes very difficult to identify press with a single monolithic actor.

Given this difficulty, we need a combined methodology, which will take into consideration factors such as genre, authorship etc. Hence, the analysis is based on five key criteria. These are: the *genre*, the broader media and political *context* of the publication of an ‘event’, the *newspaper* in which it is published and its previous and current political stance, the *authorship*, and finally, the *linguistic and stylistic strategies* of each text. These five criteria are borrowed from Norman Fairclough and Ruth Wodak’s methodological model of *Critical Analysis of Media Discourse* (1992; 1996). According to this model, texts cannot be analyzed in an isolated way; instead, they must be located in their broader media and social context. Each text contains within itself previous texts and themes, creating thus coherence and continuity between different texts. Also, the media language is heterogeneous, for it includes elements from other discourses such as the political, the cultural and the economic discourses.

In this context, the importance of *genre* is fundamental. This is because different genres create various levels of authority of the speaker/writer as well as different levels of engagement with the topic/issue; for example, the authority of a reporter differs fundamentally from the authority of a columnist. In the same vein, editorials are much more authoritative than comments and opinions published in daily papers; this is because editorials normally express the newspaper’s official policy. Therefore, the impact and authority of press texts depend largely upon genre inasmuch as authorship and the issue/event which is framed. When a story or event captures the attention of both, news stories and reports as well as editorials and commentary/analysis, then we can assume that the story has already become a top priority of the national press.

*Genre* and *authority* of the writer are strictly related to each other. There are many occasions when politicians, ministers of integration, EU ambassadors and other EU officials write commentaries in Albanian daily papers. In these cases, the impact of the commentary or

the analysis depends upon the status and social role or profession of the author. On 12 and 14 October, some newspapers used the commentaries and interviews of EU representatives in Albania to criticize the Albanian political class for the negative outcome of the Report (e.g. *Tema*).

However, news stories and opinion genres—we include here editorials, commentaries and analyses—do not follow the same logic and pace in covering events. It is worth noting that starting from 12 October to 14 October, the Report captured all the headlines and front pages in the majority of newspapers. After these dates, the publication of the Report is replaced by the debate between President Bamir Topi and Head of Parliament Jozefina Topalli on the use of the northern dialect in official speeches; other issues such as the importation of recyclable waste from Italy to Albania became pertinent and captured the headlines and front pages, pushing thus the Report to the last pages of daily newspapers. This is to say that commentaries and analyses on the EU report were still present in Albanian newspapers till the end of October-first week of November. However, even if it remained part of the public debate, the Report lost relevance by early November.

Linguistic and stylistic *strategies* play another important role in the way that press texts contribute to the formation of political and collective identities, as well as the relationship between various subjects, such as the EU and Albania, the ‘political class’ and Albanian citizens, Albania and the region, etc. Fairclough argues that linguistic variations are created by and depend upon different discourses and various social practices (1995a:41). This is particularly demonstrated by how metaphors and catchphrases ‘travel’ from one discourse to the other. Some of the most recurrent themes and metaphors used in the Albanian press to emphasize the importance of the integration are: ‘catching the train of integration’, the ‘tango’ dance between the majority and the opposition, which refers to joint efforts that both parties need to put in the integration process of Albania, or the ‘repeated isolation’ of Albania from the EU, etc. Some of the metaphors are obviously borrowed by the press from the political discourse of Albanian elites.

Finally, the broader media *context* refers to the positions that the newspaper has taken with regard to various issues in the past, as well to previous debates, relevant events or specific political moments which have dominated press debates before October 2011.

### *The sample*

For the purposes of this study, we have chosen a sample of six independent/ non-party daily newspapers; these include newspapers which lean both, to the left and to the right end of the political spectrum. The newspapers are *Gazeta Shqiptare*, *Shqip*, *Mapo*, *Tema*, *Panorama* and *Shekulli*. The analysis covers a two months period, October which is the month when the Report was published, and November. November issues were also included in the sample, for the purpose of measuring the duration and intensity of the debate and press coverage of the Report as well as its impact on other issues and relevant media debates.

This study targets a mixed audience which includes reporters, editors and other media actors, as well as the Albanian political class and the EU representatives in the country; they are all considered to be keys actors of the press debate on Europe and European integration.

### **III. Press coverage of the EU progress-report**

Even though this is not a comparative study, we could say that this year's coverage is much more informative and more complete than press coverage of previous EU progress reports. All the twelve EU criteria or requirements which Albania needs to fulfill in order to obtain the status of 'candidate country' are given full and broad coverage on the front pages. In the same vein, the EU representatives in Albania and EU officials dominate the headlines and front pages during the first days of publication of the Report (12- 13 October). This means that the national political actors are largely marginal or left out of the headlines of the front pages on these two days. This can be considered a positive aspect of the press coverage of the Report, for it means that the press has not reproduced the mutual accusations between the majority and the opposition in relation to the delayed process of integration.

#### *3. 1 The EU role and future of the relation Albania – European Union.*

One key finding of the analysis is that in this moment of 'crisis'—that is, when Albania is perceived to have digressed rather than progressed towards the EU—the EU's role in Albania is hardly ever criticized by the Albanian press. It is important to note that the Report followed the public appearance of a number of analysts who were self-identified as Euro- skeptics. Among them, various analysts such as Blendi Kajsiu, Arbër Zajmi, Blendi Sala, etc. had written extensively on the high costs of integration for Albanian businesses and commerce, as well as the lack of information available to the Albanian citizens regarding

European integration. Therefore, it could be argued that the Report was published at the rising moment of Albanian Euro-skepticism. However, this wave of Euro-skepticism proved to be short-lived: Following the publication of the Report, there are very few voices criticizing the EU approach to Albanian integration, its selection criteria for the candidate status, or the role that the EU has played in Albania in the last two years. There is a small number of analyses and commentaries (for example Nano, *Shqip*, 14 October, pg.9; Stefani, *Shqip*, 19 October, pg 9; Kajsiu, *Panorama*, 22 October, pg 23) which directly criticize the EU and its representatives in Albania for Albania's failure to achieve the status of 'candidate country'. However, these articles are in minority, and they are counterbalanced by at least two commentaries of this period: Alfred Lela's 'Euro-skeptics and why their ideas should not gain a dominant position in the political discourse' (*Mapo*, 12 October 2011, pg.11) and Igli Totozani's 'Euroskeptics made in Albania are ridiculous: Europe is our destiny' (*Shekulli*, 12 October 2011, pg 5). Both commentaries are published exactly on the day that the EU Commission issued the Report on the Western Balkans; furthermore, they are published in newspapers which are located in different political/ideological positions.

It should be emphasized that there exists a broad consensus among different newspapers in relation to the importance that the EU integration has for the Albanian citizens, in spite of all its delays. This is demonstrated through the headlines and front pages of the newspapers which quote the encouraging messages of EU representative in Tirana: 'The road towards the EU is long but we support you', (*Shqip*, 18 November 2011) or 'Sanino: The status could be opened if you provide real proof for the crisis' (*Mapo*, 13 October, pg 5). In fact, during and following the publication of the Report, the press portrays the role of the EU as crucial for the neutralization of domestic political conflict.

In the days and weeks following the publication the Report, the EU became the main source of legitimacy and authority for various social and political demands and conflicting political positions. Thus, some of the "hottest" issues after the publication of the Report were the conflict between President Topi and Head of Parliament Jozefina Topalli; the importation of recyclable waste from Italy to Albania, and finally, the new political program of the Socialist Party. In all these public debates, the conflicting parties use European integration as a strong weapon to strengthen their position against the opponent. The use of the EU as a source of legitimacy is much stronger following the publication of the Report, in comparison with times of 'normal politics'. The large number of headlines and cover pages where EU officials are directly quoted on one issue or the other, is proof to this argument.

To conclude this part, we could say that the Albanian press has fully supported the mechanisms and logic of EU conditionality, thus interpreting European integration as an issue of vital importance to the Albanian national interest.

### *3.2 Albania's relations with the Balkan neighbors and its regional standing*

There exists a broad consensus that the EU regional approach for the integration of the Western Balkans has failed. In the majority of news stories from 12 October to 14 October, Albania is compared to other countries in the region such as Serbia, Croatia and Montenegro. Here, in both commentaries and news reports, Albania's lack of progress in its process of European integration is contrasted to the progress made by its regional neighbors, who 'have all taken positive news (from the EU), except for us and Bosnia'. In this vein, one of the prominent themes of the Albanian press is that, even though Albania's neighbors have been through ethnic war or have been directly responsible for them, they have fared much better than Albania in the integration process.

However, in spite of these prominent themes, there are two key findings related to Albania's regional standing: firstly, the fact of 'being left behind' in the integration process, does not stimulate nationalistic or accusative comments against Serbia or other Balkan countries. Secondly, this fact does not seem to encourage any sense of antagonism or opposition against the EU.

However, various analyses and commentaries foresee a two-speed integration process for countries of the Balkan region; this differentiated speed would accordingly result in the division *de facto* among countries of the region: "the division of the region into two parts (incidentally or not, the division also reflects the religious differences between the more advanced and the less progressive countries), would become a difficult and dangerous scenario for Europe's own stability" (Elezi, *Mapo*, 13 October, pg. 22). The prospect of a divided Balkans the basis of the integration progress and national development of each individual country of the region is a very prominent theme of the Albanian press following the publication of the Report. It remains to be seen as to whether there will be any significant changes in the broader Albanian political discourse in relation to this new position of Albania within the region, and how the Albanian press will reflect these changes.

### *3.3 The importance of Europe and European integration.*

In the light of the negative results of the last EU progressreport, the main question to be answered is what are the meanings and the importance attached to the Europe and to European integration in the Albanian press? Put more simply, ‘what have we lost after this refusal’ according to the press?

Firstly, EU integration means economic prosperity. A number of daily newspapers such as *Shekulli*, *Shqip* and *GazetaShqiptare* emphasize the economic losses which would come as a result of the low credibility and the negative image of the country, following the refusal of the ‘candidate country’ status; all these would be translated into less foreign investments for Albania ( *Shqip*, 11 October, pg 3; *Shekulli*, 12 October, pg 4; *Gazeta Shqiptare*, 13 October, pg 3). Albanians’ economic loss due to delayed integration is emphasized not only in the opinion genres—commentaries, editorials and analyses— but also on the news columns.

Secondly, EU integration means less political conflict and more cooperation between the government and the opposition. The majority of headlines identify the EU as the only actor that has the potential to reconcile the government and the opposition, playing thus the role of a ‘referee’ or ‘fair judge’. According to the press, the main responsibility for the slowdown of integration rests undoubtedly with the Albanian political class. Yet, how responsibility is framed, depends largely upon the broader context and political standing of each individual newspaper.

Thirdly, EU integration means higher accountability of the political class to the citizens. For many editorialists, EU integration would give the strongest impetus for social justice and punishment of the corrupt elites; this theme is particularly pertinent in the left wing newspapers. In this context, examples from Central and Eastern European where the EU has served as catalyst for domestic democratization are cited: ‘(...)if we were to be members of the EU, the arrogance and prepotency of our elite would be punished as it happened to Mekar in Slovakia and Heider in Austria’ ( Nurellari, *Shqip*, 17 October 2011, pg. 8). The editorial goes on to speak about the relation between society and state, attributing to the EU a decisive role in democratizing this relationship: ‘more than 70% of the (national) legislation and regulations that have a direct impact on citizens, are managed by the European Parliament; (if Albania becomes a EU member) it would mean that the Albanian political elite would have no chance to pass laws which favor their own or their partners’ companies and which unfairly punish their rivals’( *Shqip*, 17 October 2011, pg. 8)

In the context of these themes, *visa liberalization* seems to be a story from the past, and no longer a proof of Albania's success in its process of European integration. In the majority of newspapers, the theme of visa liberalization is either completely marginal or referred to as an 'incomplete achievement' and no longer a pre-condition for integration. The later interpretation is more prominent in those newspapers which are more critical of the government, such as *Shekulli* or *Shqip*. For example, the day before the publication of the Report, *Shekulli* published a commentary on European citizenship and the numerous benefits it could bring to the Albanian society, should Albania ever take the status of 'EU member state'. The image illustrating the commentary was a poster with an image of the biometric passport displayed on the main boulevard in Tirana in celebration of visa liberalization in February 2011, but which is torn and frayed now, a year after being put there (*Shekulli*, 12 October, pg 2).

## **VI. Usage of stylistic and linguistic strategies.**

Press discourse combines various stylistic and linguistic strategies. These strategies help to form various political and social identities as well as boundaries between 'us' and 'them'. For the purposes of this analysis, we will focus on how different genres of the Albanian press—with particular focus on news reports—frame responsibility and articulate the relationship between citizens, the political class, the EU and other actors.

### *4.1 Framing responsibility for the slowdown of the integration process*

Those newspapers which are less critical to the current government framed Albania's failure to achieve the status of EU 'candidate country' in largely neutral tones. The entire 'political class' or 'politics' were made responsible for this failure. Also, political moments such as the opposition's parliamentary boycott, the violent event of 21 January 2011 and the local elections of May 2011 are all framed as equal causes of this failure. For example, the headline quotes: 'European Commission: domestic politics suspended for a year', Subtitle: 'The boycott, 21 January and elections strengthened polarization' (*Panorama*, 13 October, pg 3); or headline quotes: 'Berisha: Rama blocked the process, but Albanians are wise'/ subtitle: 'The government wants to apply reforms but it cannot force the opposition to follow suit' (*Panorama*, 13 October, pg 3).

This order of causes of Albania's failure to get the status of 'candidate country' is reversed in left wing newspapers. For example, headline of front page quotes: 'The EU: the parliament is one-sided, the administration is politicized and the media is controlled by the

government' or another headline of news pages: '21 January and the local elections are the main causes of the refusal' (*Shqip*, 13 October, pg. 2 and 3). Using more direct tones, *Tema* quotes in its front page headline the representative of EU Commission in Tirana, Etoze Sequi: '21 January was the saddest event that I have experienced' (*Tema*, 14 October; see also *Shqip*, 14 October, pg 4). In late October, *Tema* also published an interview of the Danish Ambassador in Albania, titled 'The government's failure, not the political deadlock stopped you from getting inside the EU'; the headline shifted thus the responsibility from all political actors to the 'government'.

In few occasions, those newspapers which are more critical of the current government deploy images that bring to memory the events of 21 of January and in one occasion, the Gerdec tragedy (see *Gazeta Shqiptare*, 13 October pg 2). These images are used to remind the audience of the responsible ones for the delayed process of integration.

It is important to note here the difference between headlines of news reports, on the one hand, and headlines of commentaries and analyses, on the other. Whereas the headlines of commentaries and analyses reflect immediately the author's political position, the headlines of news columns are usually direct quotes of EU representatives in Albania. This means that they frame the political class' responsibility only through the words of the 'international community'. In contrast with analyses and commentaries, news reports lack almost completely arguments and reflection: it seems at times like the reporter's voice is dubbed by the voice of EU representatives in the country.

#### *4.2 The boundary between politics and citizens*

The majority of headlines emphasized that fact that 'we are the guilty ones', or that 'we deserved it', or that 'the political class leaves us outside the EU'. Thus, all newspapers of the sample reproduce and reinforce the dichotomy between the citizens and the political class, which is considered to be the main cause for the delay of the integration process. 'Politics' and not the public opinion or the citizens is framed as the responsible one for this delay. It is interesting to note that not in one single case, the press reflects upon the role that it has played itself, or that it can play in the process of fulfilling the required criteria for EU integration.

Despite the political position of each newspaper, each one of them puts emphasis on the absence of dialogue and consensus between the majority and the opposition, thus reproducing the words of the Report. The press' reproduction of the themes and the

vocabulary that the EU uses can be also traced to the press coverage of other issues, such the agreement struck between the majority and the opposition at the end of November. It could be argued that despite its critical tones, the press follows the news agenda and reproduces the vocabulary of both, the political elite and the EU representatives in Albania.

### **Conclusions: Independence of the Albanian press and the national interest**

The aim of this paper was to investigate the various ways in which the Albanian press interprets and frames issues, such as the relationship between Albania and the EU, the Albanian political class and Albanian citizens, as well as Albania's standing vis-à-vis its Balkan neighbors. At the same time, the study aimed to explore how different independent newspapers framed responsibility for the negative outcome of the EU progress report. To this end, the study focused on one case study, which is the publication of the EU progress report on the countries of the Western Balkans.

There are a number of conclusions which can be drawn from our analysis: Firstly, despite the negative outcome of the Report, the press does not hold the EU responsible for this outcome. In fact, it could be argued that the Albanian press is largely supportive of the EU, and it does not thus reflect what the Albanian Institute of International Relations (AIIS) recently suggested in relation to the rise of Albanian skepticism about European integration (AIIS, *The prospect of EU Integration of Albania. Perspectives and Perceptions*, 2011). Secondly, although comparisons and contrasts of Albania's progress to the EU with the other Balkan states are ample, the Albanian press does not express any sense of antagonism against the other Balkan neighbors or the EU itself. Thirdly, the EU is framed as a normative and democratizing force, which has the potential to discipline the Albanian political class and neutralize the tense Albanian political stage; furthermore, the role of the EU is framed as vital to the interests of Albanian citizens.

These similarities between all newspapers notwithstanding, there are also significant differences between different newspapers; these differences pertain to the current political position of each individual newspaper, which is its standing vis-à-vis the current government and the opposition. Depending on their various political positions, the newspapers use various linguistic, stylistic and visual strategies, as well as different methods of news display and ordering. In a similar vein, the Albanian press often reproduces the political agenda of the elites and political conflict. The extensive coverage that the press gave to the Topi-Topalli debate is proof to this point.

Finally, we suggest that this year's press coverage of the EU progress-report on Albania and the Western Balkans was much more extensive as well as critical than the previous years. Furthermore, there is a broader consensus among all newspapers of the sample—despite their different political and ideological positions—on the necessity of the Albanian political elite to overcome political deadlock and engage in the political dialogue concerning the fulfillment of criteria for EU integration. However, the Albanian press continues to follow and reproduce the political agenda of both, Albanian political elite and EU representatives. It does not yet set the agenda; nor does it open new issues and topics in the public debate in the same way that the Albanian visual media does.