

Handbook on Election Reporting in Albania

Tips and Resources

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1 Introduction

1.1 Why this Handbook?

This handbook serves as an essential guide to ensure the ethical and professional reporting of elections, a critical component of a thriving democratic society. It is designed specifically for Albanian journalists, media professionals, and journalism educators, providing them with practical tools and clear ethical guidelines to navigate the complex landscape of electoral reporting.

Elections represent pivotal moments where journalistic integrity and professionalism have a profound impact on democracy, governance, and societal stability. Unlike routine journalism, electoral reporting demands heightened skills, deeper knowledge, and an acute ethical sensitivity due to the potential consequences of misinformation and bias. The handbook addresses the unique challenges journalists face in Albania, including managing political polarization, combating misinformation and disinformation, complying with Albania's legal frameworks, and maintaining impartiality in a media landscape often influenced by political and commercial interests.

The handbook is methodologically and substantively based on the “Handbook on Election Reporting”, published by Mediacentar Sarajevo in 2024, which is the result of years of research and numerous consultations with media professionals in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Recognizing the specificities of the Albanian media and political context, this publication adapts and expands that model to address local challenges, while at the same time reaffirming shared regional standards of journalism in the public interest. By aligning local realities with regional standards, the Handbook contributes to safeguarding media integrity and strengthening public trust during elections. Emerging and experienced journalists alike will find this handbook invaluable for its practical advice, from understanding Albania's electoral system and media regulations to handling ethical dilemmas and politically sensitive content. The guide is structured clearly and accessibly, allowing journalists to quickly find and apply relevant information in their reporting tasks.

In using this handbook, media professionals can effectively combat misinformation, ensure impartiality, enhance transparency, and foster informed public debate. Ultimately, by adhering to these ethical and professional standards, Albanian journalists can actively reinforce democratic institutions, mitigate electoral conflict, and promote informed citizen participation, thus fulfilling journalism's fundamental role in supporting Albania's ongoing democratic development.

1.2 A Brief Overview of Elections in Albania

Albania's electoral system has undergone significant reforms and evolution since transitioning from a communist regime in the early 1990s. Currently, Albania employs a mixed-member regional proportional representation system, designed to balance proportionality with direct regional representation. Under this framework, voters cast their ballots for political parties or coalitions as well as individual candidates. Parties compile candidate lists, and seats in the parliament are allocated proportionally based on the percentage of votes received by each party, as well as individual candidates once they pass a statutory threshold.

In Albania, there are two main participatory electoral cycles, parliamentary and local, which are regulated by the country's constitutional and legal framework. Parliamentary and local elections are held every four years.

Parliamentary elections are conducted using a localized proportional representation system, with an open-list proportional representation system at the regional level. Different electoral zones form electoral constituencies based on the population of each constituency. Voters cast their vote for a party and can also express a preference for an individual candidate on the party list (open-list), with regional thresholds for the electees to enter Parliament, with thresholds for parties (generally 1% per region).

Local elections are held at the level of municipalities and cities. Citizens elect mayors and members of municipal councils. These elections are held separately from parliamentary elections and take place on the same day across the country, a Sunday decreed by the President of the Republic.

The President of Albania is elected by the Parliament, not by direct popular vote. A qualified majority is required, and the election may involve several rounds, with the qualified majority being waived if it is not achieved by round three of elections. If the Parliament fails to elect a president after five rounds, the Assembly is dissolved and early parliamentary elections are called.

Elections are announced and administered by the Central Election Commission of Albania (CEC), which is responsible for the organization, supervision, and control of the entire electoral process. The CEC publishes the election calendar, deadlines, technical guidelines, and oversees campaign financing. The law also provides for the possibility of early elections, as well as for postponed or repeated voting in specific cases. The official election campaign lasts 30 days and is subject to strict regulations and oversight by the CEC. The electoral process in Albania is regularly monitored by both domestic and international observers, who consistently issue recommendations for improving transparency, equal media access, and the integrity of the voter list.

The system is regulated by the Electoral Code, which outlines detailed rules and procedures governing every electoral phase, including candidate nomination, campaigning, voting, and the counting and announcement of results. The CEC plays a pivotal role in overseeing elections, ensuring compliance with legal standards, and addressing disputes. It collaborates closely with the Audiovisual Media Authority (AMA) to monitor media coverage and enforce fair reporting practices.

Albanian voters have historically faced challenges such as limited access to unbiased information and political manipulation. Consequently, informed participation requires transparent and reliable media coverage.

The media serves as a critical bridge connecting voters to the electoral process, ensuring they are educated about their rights, responsibilities, and the significance of their participation. Effective media coverage empowers voters to evaluate parties, candidates, and policies critically, fostering informed choices and robust democratic engagement.

Political candidates and parties are key competitive stakeholders in elections, advocating various policies and visions for Albania's future. Their roles extend beyond electoral victory to shaping public discourse, proposing solutions, and setting governance priorities.

Candidates and parties must engage responsibly, adhering strictly to ethical campaign practices and legal regulations. Given Albania’s political landscape, which is characterized by intense competition and occasional polarization, ethical campaigning becomes paramount to maintaining a fair electoral environment.

Election observers, both domestic and international, provide impartial oversight critical to the credibility and transparency of Albanian elections. Observers monitor adherence to electoral standards, evaluate fairness, and report objectively on electoral conduct, helping identify and rectify irregularities or breaches.

2 General Professional Standards for Election Reporting

Elections are not just about politicians, they are about people. Creative election reporting requires going beyond press conferences and party statements to explore how political decisions shape everyday lives. In a landscape often dominated by rhetoric and staged events, meaningful journalism must reconnect audiences with the real issues that matter to them. In consequence journalists must:

1. Focus on Real-Life Issues, Not Just Rhetoric

Rather than limiting coverage to political speeches or party platforms, prioritize reporting on issues that impact citizens directly, such as healthcare access, education quality, environmental degradation, housing, employment, and youth migration. What are the problems voters care most about? What are the lived experiences behind abstract policy promises?

2. Humanize the Narrative

Bring stories to life by giving them a human face. A teacher struggling with underfunded schools, a patient navigating long hospital wait times, or a farmer coping with water shortages says more than a politician’s vague pledge. Combine interviews, emotional testimony, and vivid visual storytelling, photos, video, infographics, to create empathy and understanding.

3. Educate While You Inform

Elections are complex. Use your platform to explain the different types of elections (local and parliamentary), the voting process, the role of independent institutions, and how to spot disinformation or manipulation. Break it down into simple, engaging formats: reels, story carousels, Q&A boxes, or short animated explainers, especially for younger voters.

4. Listen to the People, Not Just the Politicians

The most valuable sources are often not at the top. Prioritize citizens who live with the consequences of political decisions. Explore how social systems (health, justice, education) function or fail in practice. Ask: Who benefits, who suffers, and why?

5. Follow the Chain of Responsibility

Expose how inefficiencies or political blockages at local, regional, or national levels affect tangible projects, like a stalled school reconstruction or a non-functional water system. Show how governance (or lack thereof) translates into real consequences for real people.

6. Repeat the Right Questions

Hold officials accountable by asking tough questions more than once. Track who refuses to respond, who deflects, and who provides evidence-based answers. Keep a public count. Silence, evasion, or contradictions are part of the story.

7. Compare and Inspire

Don't stop at problems, show solutions. Investigate how other countries or communities have overcome similar challenges. Could they be adapted locally? This approach fosters constructive public discourse and keeps the story evolving.

8. Go Beyond the Press Release

Skip ceremonial ribbon-cuttings or rehearsed campaign events unless they reveal something deeper. Use official material only as a springboard to dive into systemic analysis, power dynamics, or policy gaps. Avoid providing uncritical exposure to incumbent candidates, scrutinize actions, not optics.

9. Engage Creatively, Speak Visually

Especially for Gen Z and younger audiences, language matters. Use subtitles, emojis, relatable memes, infographics, or TikTok-style video explainers. Prioritize clarity over jargon. Simplify without dumbing down. Storytelling should feel fresh, not forced.

10. Follow Up and Close the Loop

A powerful story doesn't end with publication. Follow up. Did a public reaction occur? Did a politician respond? Was a change made, or ignored? Show your audience that journalism isn't just a one-way report but an ongoing civic process.

3 Rules for Media in Albania

The Constitution of the Republic of Albania explicitly enshrines freedom of expression and freedom of the press as fundamental rights. Article 22 states that:

“Freedom of expression is guaranteed. Freedom of the press, radio, and television is guaranteed. Prior censorship of means of communication is prohibited.”

This provision establishes a clear foundation for journalistic activity free from state interference. It prohibits any form of prior censorship and affirms the media's right to operate independently. These protections extend to all forms of media, print, broadcast, and digital, and provide journalists with the constitutional backing to pursue investigative reporting, cover elections, and critique political power.

Additionally, Article 23 guarantees the right to access public information, reinforcing the notion that transparency is essential for informed public discourse. Citizens, including journalists, have the legal right to request and receive information from public institutions, a right that is particularly vital during elections. Access to public information is a fundamental right in democratic societies, especially during election periods when informed decision-making and institutional accountability are vital. For

journalists, the ability to obtain accurate and timely information ensures that electoral processes are transparent and voters are well-informed.

In Albania, this right is guaranteed under Law No. 119/2014 “On the Right to Information”, which obligates public institutions to disclose data upon request and to proactively publish information of public interest. This includes electoral logistics, campaign financing, public spending, and the allocation of media airtime.

3.1 Rules Applicable to all Media

Albanian journalists covering elections must operate within strict legal boundaries, especially when reporting on sensitive issues that involve political criticism, public allegations, or emotionally charged language. The Criminal Code of the Republic of Albania lays out clear provisions regarding defamation, hate speech, and incitement to violence, all of which apply with full force during electoral campaigns. These legal norms exist not to limit press freedom but to ensure that democratic processes remain free from misinformation, inflammatory rhetoric, and harmful stereotyping.

Defamation and Insult

Under Articles 119 and 120 of the [Criminal Code](#):

- **Insult (Article 119):** The deliberate offense of another individual is considered a criminal misdemeanor. If the offense is committed publicly, against multiple persons, or repeatedly, the penalties increase.
 - Penalties include fines ranging from 50,000 to 3,000,000 Albanian Lek.
- **Defamation (Article 120):** The intentional dissemination of false information that harms the honor or dignity of another person is punishable.
 - This applies equally to statements made in public or via media outlets.
 - Penalties range from 50,000 to 3,000,000 Albanian Lek, depending on whether the act was committed publicly or repeatedly.

These provisions are particularly relevant during election periods when political figures are frequent subjects of media scrutiny. While critical journalism is protected, journalists must ensure that their reporting is based on verified facts.

Hate Speech and Racial Incitement

Albania’s Criminal Code explicitly criminalizes hate speech, both offline and online. The articles particularly relevant to journalists include:

- **Article 119/a and 119/b:** These address public distribution and use of racist or xenophobic material via computer systems.
 - Any journalist or media outlet sharing such content, even in quotation or commentary, risks criminal liability if not properly contextualized or condemned.
- **Article 265 – Incitement to Hatred or Disputes:** This provision penalizes any encouragement of racial, ethnic, religious, or sexual orientation-based hatred or disputes, including the preparation or circulation of materials that may incite conflict.
 - Punishable by 2 to 10 years of imprisonment.

- **Article 266 – Call for National Hatred:** Criminalizes public incitement to hatred or violence against a population group, especially when it threatens public peace.
 - This includes fanning hostility, defamation, or calling for arbitrary acts against specific communities.
 - Punishable by 2 to 8 years of imprisonment.

These articles become particularly sensitive during elections, when campaign rhetoric can escalate and be echoed or amplified by the media. While covering inflammatory statements made by political actors, journalists must take precautions not to reproduce hate speech without appropriate framing, context, or condemnation. Failure to do so can result in complicity under the law.

Digital Dissemination and Online Responsibility

Modern electoral coverage often involves digital publication and social media engagement. The Criminal Code recognizes this reality:

- Dissemination of hate speech or defamatory content through online platforms is treated with equal seriousness as traditional media.
- Journalists and media managers are held accountable for the content they publish or endorse on official digital channels, including websites, Facebook pages, and YouTube channels.

This legal parity between digital and traditional platforms means that journalists must apply the same editorial rigor and legal awareness online as they would in print or on television.

Election-Specific Protections: Chapter X of the Criminal Code

Beyond the general provisions on defamation and incitement, Albania’s Criminal Code includes Chapter X, which addresses criminal offenses that affect free elections and the democratic system of elections. Although this chapter primarily focuses on acts such as vote-buying, electoral obstruction, and falsification, its spirit reinforces the importance of maintaining fairness and legality throughout the electoral process, including in media coverage.

In this context, inflammatory or defamatory coverage that undermines public trust in the electoral process, or misrepresents candidates in ways that distort democratic competition, can contribute to an environment of electoral manipulation or suppression. Journalists must thus be especially vigilant during election periods.

Practical Tips for Journalists

To navigate these legal requirements safely and responsibly, journalists covering elections should observe the following practices:

- **Verify all information** before publishing, especially if it relates to the character, integrity, or criminal background of a candidate.
- **Avoid direct repetition of hate speech**, even if it originates from a public figure, unless the report clearly contextualizes and challenges it.
- **Do not amplify rumors or unverified claims**, especially those that could incite hostility toward individuals or communities.

- **Use careful language** when describing groups or individuals, especially ethnic, religious, or marginalized communities.

Provide the right of reply for those subject to criticism, as required by both ethical journalism codes and electoral media regulations.

Audio-Visual Media

[Law No. 97/2013 on Audiovisual Media \(amended\)](#)

This is the primary law governing broadcast media in Albania. It outlines the structure and functions of the AMA, the national regulatory body responsible for licensing, monitoring, and enforcing standards for radio and television. Key provisions relevant to elections include:

- **Ensuring media pluralism:** The law requires that the spectrum of political and social opinion be fairly represented, especially during election campaigns.
- **Balanced coverage:** Public and private broadcasters are obligated to ensure that news and political programs present balanced and impartial content.
- **Monitoring of election content:** AMA, in coordination with the CEC, monitors broadcasters to ensure compliance with campaign coverage rules. Sanctions may be imposed for imbalanced or discriminatory coverage.

3.2 Paid Political Advertising in Electronic Media

Only officially registered electoral subjects may air political advertisements. Ads must:

- Clearly identify the sponsoring entity.
- Comply with time limits: max 90 minutes per party per outlet for general political advertising; 140 minutes per outlet for preferential list candidates.
- Be broadcast between 15:00–18:00 and 21:00–24:00 daily.

Cost Transparency and Fair Pricing

Broadcasters must submit ad rate cards to the CEC five days before the campaign and apply equal rates across all political subjects. Half of the total ad time must be made available for free, with costs deductible as business expenses under tax law.

Non-parliamentary parties and independent candidates are entitled to 10 minutes of advertising across the campaign, with pricing parity and equal access to free airtime as parliamentary parties.

CEC penalties for breaches include fines of 2 million Albanian Lek (local) or 3.5 million Albanian Lek (national), and potential transmission suspension within 48 hours.

Restrictions on Government Advertising

From four months before election day, public institutions at central and local levels are banned from placing advertisements, except for legal notices and voter awareness messages. Violations result in reclassification of the content as party airtime and penalties for the broadcaster.

The Role of the Audiovisual Media Authority (AMA)

The AMA is responsible for monitoring the conduct of broadcasters during elections across all radio and television platforms, both public and private. Its duties include:

- Monitoring campaign-related content in news programs, political ads, debates, and editorials.
- Ensuring that media outlets respect the legal framework and the guidelines approved by the CEC.

According to Article 85 of the Electoral Code:

- AMA's monitoring begins across the entire electoral territory and is based on a **Monitoring Methodology** adopted and published by the CEC at least three months before Election Day.
- The AMA is required to submit detailed reports, at least weekly, to the CEC. These reports identify imbalances or violations and include proposals for administrative measures.
- These reports are made public via the CEC's official website to ensure transparency and public access to oversight findings.

Political parties and candidates have the right to submit responses or objections to these findings, and these are considered during the Commission's deliberations.

3.3 Direct Addresses and Announcements by the CEC in Media

The CEC acts as the primary enforcement body for media-related electoral rules. Its role is to act upon the AMA's findings and impose sanctions where appropriate. It is authorized to:

- Evaluate AMA reports and independently verify violations or investigate complaints.
- Issue warnings or impose administrative sanctions against broadcasters or political entities found in breach of regulations.
- Enforce its decisions immediately, as appeals do not delay execution.

In addition, the CEC has access to the comprehensive records of election broadcasts:

- All radio and TV operators are legally required to record their entire election-period programming.
- These recordings must be archived for ten months after the election and provided to the CEC on request.

The AMA and CEC function within a cooperative framework where:

- AMA monitors and reports on media behavior.
- CEC acts on AMA's findings and enforces penalties.

This separation of roles preserves institutional independence, ensures procedural clarity, and enhances the accountability of both media outlets and electoral subjects. It also reinforces public confidence in the neutrality and effectiveness of the electoral process.

3.4 Obligations of Online Media

Journalistic Code of Ethics in Albania

The Albanian Code of Ethics for Journalists, developed by the Albanian Media Institute with support from the EU and the Council of Europe, provides a self-regulatory framework that promotes integrity, accountability, and public trust in journalism. Grounded in Albania's Constitution and international human rights instruments, it applies to both traditional and digital media.

The Code emphasizes freedom of expression and access to information as pillars of democracy. Journalists must report truthfully, impartially, and respectfully, ensuring accuracy, fairness, and transparency. Misleading content, manipulated visuals, and unverified reports are prohibited. Errors must be corrected, and affected parties have the right to reply.

Impartiality is vital, especially on controversial issues. While opinions are protected, news must remain objective and inclusive of diverse perspectives.

Information gathering must be conducted in a manner that is both legal and ethical, with respect for confidentiality, especially for vulnerable sources, unless the public interest outweighs these considerations. Journalists must disclose how source material will be used.

Editorial independence is crucial. Journalists must avoid conflicts of interest, clearly distinguish between editorial and sponsored content, and refrain from misusing information for personal gain.

Editors are responsible for all content, including user contributions. Hate speech and defamation must be moderated, and third-party accusations verified with a right of response.

The Code prohibits hate speech and discrimination, emphasizes privacy, and restricts covert methods to cases of significant public interest. Special protections apply to children and persons with disabilities.

It also requires respect for intellectual property, proper attribution, and professional language. Plagiarism and misattribution are serious violations.

Albanian Media Council and Self-Regulation

The [Albanian Media Council](#) (AMC) is an independent self-regulatory body founded by journalists to uphold ethical standards and professional integrity in Albanian media. [Officially registered in 2015](#) and operational by 2017, the Council emerged in response to widespread breaches of the national Code of Ethics, which previously lacked enforcement mechanisms. AMC promotes self-regulation, enabling journalists to define and enforce ethical standards without interference from political or commercial interests. Its work aligns with European democratic values, safeguarding press freedom while ensuring accountability and responsible reporting, both of which are particularly crucial during elections.

A major development in media self-regulation was the launch of the Alliance for Ethical Media ([Aleanca për Media Etike](#)) in February 2020. This voluntary coalition began with 19 member outlets and grew to 38 by 2024, including TV stations, online portals, and print media. Through its General Assembly, the Alliance elects an Ethics Board annually, reflecting the collective commitment of media actors to ethical journalism. Widely regarded as a best practice in the Western Balkans, the Alliance demonstrates how media can take initiative to raise standards collaboratively, without waiting for external regulation, reinforcing the credibility and independence of the press in Albania.

4 Tips and Guidance for Election Reporting

Journalists should adhere to the following standards to uphold fairness and impartiality:

- **Refrain from expressing personal views** on candidates, parties, or political issues, both on and off the air.
- Report **quotes accurately and in full context**. Never manipulate, paraphrase misleadingly, or omit important parts of a candidate’s statement.
- If reporting on speeches delivered in a minority language, take **extreme care in translation** to preserve the original meaning. Editorial teams should decide whether to use subtitles or voiceovers, always ensuring fidelity to the speaker’s intent.
- A **news item should never be used to support a candidate or party**. This includes the selection of images, music, or phrasing that could be interpreted as endorsing a specific viewpoint.
- Maintain a **neutral tone**. Journalists must report on political differences without judgment or commentary.
- Journalists must **withhold all personal opinions** from their election reporting. Personal beliefs about a candidate or policy should never influence what is reported, or how.
- In the field, journalists must maintain a **non-partisan appearance**. Do not wear or carry any item, such as clothing, stickers, or badges, bearing party logos, slogans, or candidate names.
- Do not express **any opinion during rallies, interviews, or live field reporting**, regardless of provocation or setting.

4.1 Beginning of the Election Period

Tip 1: Source credibility and transparency

Wherever possible, information should be attributed to named sources. Articles based entirely on anonymous sources are inherently less credible and should be avoided, especially in the context of elections.

Tip 2: The importance of professional distance

While access to political parties and candidates is essential for effective reporting, these relationships must remain strictly professional. Personal closeness or informal friendships with political figures can distort a journalist’s judgment, whether consciously or not. Familiarity must never translate into favoritism.

A journalist should not:

- Accept gifts, payments, or favors from political figures or campaign teams.
- Exchange coverage or silence for access, information, or personal benefit.
- Engage in any activity that could be interpreted as political endorsement.

Any form of inducement, whether a small gift or a sponsored dinner, can cast doubt on the integrity of reporting. Even the perception of bias can damage public confidence in media neutrality.

Tip 3: Recognizing and avoiding conflicts of interest

A conflict of interest occurs when a journalist's private interests, financial, political, or personal, interfere with their professional duties. During election coverage, these conflicts are particularly damaging. They can call into question not just one story, but the credibility of the entire newsroom.

Media organizations should have clear policies that:

- Prohibit journalists from promoting political parties, candidates, or affiliated causes.
- Require staff to disclose any political affiliations or prior employment with campaigns.
- Prevent news anchors, reporters, and producers from publicly expressing political opinions, especially on issues under active debate.

For example, a journalist who openly declares support for a party on social media, or appears at campaign events, undermines their own neutrality, and by extension, the trustworthiness of the media outlet they represent.

Tip 4: Ensuring integrity in reporting practices

Editorial independence also means maintaining high standards in the reporting process itself. Ethical journalism does not rely on underhanded tactics or exploit the ignorance of interviewees.

Plagiarism, misattribution, and the misuse of others' work are further breaches of journalistic integrity. Journalists must always:

- Credit the work of colleagues and other media outlets when citing interviews, articles, or visual content.
- Acknowledge the origin of all photos, videos, and quotes used in their reporting.

Such transparency not only upholds ethical standards, it also strengthens the credibility of the work.

Tip 5: Respect for privacy, dignity, and minority rights

In a democratic society, journalists do not merely observe the electoral process, they help shape it. The way elections are reported significantly influences public perception, civic trust, and voter behavior. Respect for privacy, human dignity, and minority rights is not only a matter of professional

ethics, it is a cornerstone of socially responsible journalism. During elections, these values guide the coverage of candidates, voters, and communities, particularly those who are vulnerable, underrepresented, or at risk of being stereotyped, harassed, or defamed.

Elections often blur the line between public and private life. Political candidates, especially, invite a degree of public scrutiny due to the nature of their ambition for leadership. A guiding question must be: *Is this information essential for the public to understand as a matter of public interest, or does it merely satisfy public curiosity?* Reporting on a candidate’s health, family life, religious beliefs, or past relationships may, in some cases, be relevant, particularly if they contradict public statements or influence policy positions, but such matters should never be pursued gratuitously.

Example: If a candidate is campaigning on family values but has a documented history of domestic abuse, reporting on that history becomes a matter of public interest. However, speculating about a candidate’s divorce or the behavior of their children, without factual basis or public relevance, crosses the line into invasion of privacy.

Tip 6: Human dignity and the power of words

Every person, regardless of their public status, has the right to be treated with dignity. Journalists wield a powerful tool, their words. The language, tone, and framing used in stories can either humanize or dehumanize their subjects. Journalists must avoid stigmatizing language, unfounded allegations, or sensationalist headlines that cast doubt on someone’s character or reinforce negative stereotypes. This applies equally to political candidates and ordinary citizens interviewed or featured in stories.

Example: Referring to a Roma candidate as “the gypsy contender” is not only inappropriate but perpetuates harmful stereotypes. A better formulation would be: “the Roma community’s candidate, [name], who is campaigning on issues of inclusion and access to services.”

Respectful language also involves avoiding rhetorical devices that subtly question someone’s morality or competence without evidence.

Tip 7: Covering vulnerable and minority communities

Minority groups, whether defined by ethnicity, religion, language, gender, disability, or sexual orientation, often face systemic exclusion from both political representation and media visibility. During elections, journalists have an opportunity to correct this imbalance by amplifying their voices, highlighting the issues they face, and challenging discriminatory narratives. Coverage should be inclusive and sensitive to context. Stereotyping or tokenizing individuals from marginalized communities reinforces social divisions.

Example: Reporting on a candidate from the LGBT community should focus on their platform and qualifications, not reduce their identity to a headline novelty (“Gay candidate runs for mayor!”). Similarly, referring to women candidates solely in terms of appearance or family role detracts from their professional competence.

Tip 8: Avoiding rumors and defamatory claims

Elections are fertile ground for the spread of rumors and defamation, often designed to damage opponents. Journalists must be vigilant not to become vehicles for unverified or malicious allegations.

Credibility is earned through consistency and care. Reporting rumors, even by saying “it is rumored that...”, gives them airtime they don’t deserve. Instead, the standard of evidence must be high.

When confronted with rumors:

- Ask: Who is making this claim, and what is their motive?
- Seek confirmation from credible sources before considering publication.
- If the claim is unverifiable but newsworthy due to its spread or impact, report on the circulation of the claim, not its content, and focus on public reaction, fact-checking efforts, or official denials.

Tip 9: The role of journalists in changing the narrative

Journalists do not merely document the political process, they shape it. The questions they ask, the images they choose, the voices they amplify, and the framing they use all influence how the public perceives candidates and issues. During elections, this power carries even greater weight.

To uphold professional ethics and foster democratic inclusion, journalists must:

- Give equal space and visibility to women candidates, ensuring they are covered with the same depth and seriousness as male counterparts.
- Feature women and gender minorities not only as candidates, but also as voters, experts, commentators, and community leaders.
- Highlight the gendered dimensions of political issues, such as healthcare, employment, education, and safety, while avoiding stereotypical or reductionist narratives.
- Use inclusive and neutral language that affirms the credibility and competence of all candidates, regardless of gender.

Gender-sensitive reporting is not about following a rigid set of rules. It requires constant awareness, critical reflection, and editorial courage. Here are some common pitfalls to avoid, and better alternatives to adopt:

Avoid biased descriptors and framing:

- Instead of focusing on a female candidate’s looks or clothing, focus on her political platform or legislative experience.
- Avoid diminutive or patronizing language that would not be used to describe a male counterpart.

Avoid sexist or exclusionary language:

- Refer to individuals by their professional roles, not their relationships (e.g., use “MP X” rather than “wife of Y”).
- Choose gender-neutral job titles and avoid defaulting to masculine forms.
- Watch for subtle bias in verbs or adjectives: avoid implying that women are “too emotional,” “soft,” or “unfit” for leadership roles.

4.2 Preparing for an Election Period

A detailed understanding of the electoral calendar is the foundation of any credible election coverage strategy. In Albania, the electoral process is governed by the Electoral Code, which outlines specific phases: voter registration and verification, candidate registration, campaign period, media monitoring, Election Day, and post-election certification.

Media organizations must synchronize their editorial calendars with these legal benchmarks. For instance, coverage intensity and type should evolve in accordance with each phase. Prior to the official start of the campaign, focus should be placed on electoral preparedness, including the readiness of institutions like the CEC, voter roll integrity, and the clarity of election rules. As the campaign begins, attention should shift to candidate profiles, party platforms, key campaign events, and promises made to the electorate.

Tip 10: Developing an editorial plan

A pre-election editorial plan should serve as a roadmap for the entire campaign period. It should reflect the organization’s commitment to ethical standards, impartiality, and public interest journalism.

A strong editorial plan includes:

- **Objectives:** Clear goals regarding the nature, scope, and tone of electoral coverage.
- **Audience Engagement:** Strategies to educate and inform the electorate, particularly marginalized groups.
- **Coverage Themes:** Defining key areas of focus (e.g. governance, economy, rule of law, minority rights, youth policies).
- **Formats and Platforms:** Planning for a mix of print, broadcast, digital, and interactive content.
- **Editorial Calendar:** Aligning story assignments with major campaign events and legal deadlines.

Newsrooms should also adopt internal policies for dealing with politically sensitive content, anonymous sources, and breaking news, ensuring consistent and responsible reporting.

Tip 11: Resource allocation and team structure

Covering elections requires coordinated human and technical resources. Planning involves not only assigning political reporters, but also mobilizing visual teams (photographers, videographers), social media strategists, data journalists, fact-checkers, and legal advisors. In addition, newsrooms should:

- Establish an elections desk or dedicated coordination unit responsible for overseeing all coverage.
- Identify regional correspondents to ensure comprehensive coverage across urban and rural areas.
- Appoint beat reporters to cover specific political parties or thematic areas.
- Train junior staff and freelancers on electoral reporting standards and legal risks.

Election coverage can place significant strain on staff. Planning for shift rotations, stress management, and safety protocols is essential, particularly if reporters are covering politically charged rallies or remote voting centers.

Tip 12: Ensuring balanced coverage of political actors

Equitable representation of all political parties and candidates is a cornerstone of democratic media coverage. Editorial planning must incorporate strategies to:

- Offer equal interview opportunities to major parties and independent candidates.
- Avoid disproportionate coverage based on incumbency or advertising revenue.
- Present comparative policy analyses rather than focusing on personalities.
- Facilitate balanced debates with clear rules for participation and moderation.

Balance must be preserved not only in airtime or space, but also in tone, framing, and language. Media monitoring tools can help track and adjust imbalances as coverage unfolds.

Tip 13: Audience engagement and civic education

The pre-election period offers an opportunity for media to engage directly with citizens, encouraging political participation and civic dialogue. Editorial plans can include:

- Hosting town halls or forums on key election issues.
- Launching Q&A platforms for voter concerns.
- Creating explainers on voting procedures, candidate registration, and election law.

Inclusive programming should ensure the participation of women, youth, minorities, and persons with disabilities. Multilingual content or localized coverage may be necessary to reach underrepresented groups.

Tip 14: Ethical responsibilities in reporting hate speech

Journalists must weigh two professional obligations when confronting hate speech during election coverage:

1. **The duty to inform the public** accurately and comprehensively about what political figures and parties are saying.
2. **The duty to protect the public** from language that may incite hatred, violence, or discrimination, particularly in volatile sociopolitical contexts.

Balancing these duties requires thoughtful editorial judgment and a commitment to responsible journalism. Ethical reporting does not mean censoring reality, but rather contextualizing and critiquing harmful rhetoric, and ensuring that its public impact is carefully considered and mitigated.

Key issues to keep in mind:

- **Do not amplify hate speech** without critique. Simply repeating or rebroadcasting discriminatory statements gives them visibility and potential legitimacy. If such speech is newsworthy, it must be **carefully framed** with strong editorial context.
- **Call out the source and intent.** Make clear who made the statement, what their role is, and what implications their words might have. This helps the public understand both the content and its potential social impact.
- **Expose consequences.** If hateful or inflammatory rhetoric leads to violent incidents, discrimination, or public unrest, these consequences should be fully documented. For instance, if supporters of a candidate commit violence after a rally, the linkage must be reported as part of the broader narrative.
- **Avoid euphemisms or softening.** Diluting hate speech through vague or ambiguous language does not neutralize its effect, it may instead obscure the seriousness of the problem.
- **Refrain from sensationalism.** Do not use hate speech as a way to attract clicks, boost engagement, or create controversy. Editorial integrity must always trump commercial motives.

Tip 15: Reporting options: When to publish, how to frame

Journalists and editors must decide not only *if* hate speech is worth covering, but *how* to do so in a way that fulfills their responsibility to the public.

Consider these editorial questions before reporting inflammatory content:

- Does the statement serve a legitimate public interest?
- Could the publication or broadcast of the quote amplify hatred or lead to violence?
- Is there sufficient context to explain the quote and its potential impact?
- Are alternative viewpoints being presented to challenge or counterbalance the statement?
- Are there editorial warnings or disclaimers in place to guide the audience?

If the answer to these questions suggests the potential for harm outweighs public benefit, editors may opt not to publish the quote or may summarize it in neutral terms rather than quoting it verbatim.

Tip 16: Live broadcast and moderated discussions

Hate speech poses unique challenges in live formats, such as televised debates, call-in shows, or live-streamed interviews. In these contexts, journalists have a proactive duty to intervene immediately and decisively.

What to do during live broadcast:

- **Interrupt the speaker immediately** if they use hate speech or inflammatory language.
- **Distance yourself and the outlet** from the content by making a clear on-air statement that the views expressed are not endorsed and are in breach of journalistic standards.
- **Warn the guest:** If the behavior continues, clearly state they will not be allowed to continue speaking or may be removed from the broadcast.
- **Debrief and contextualize after the fact.** During follow-up coverage, provide the audience with a firm editorial stance explaining why the incident occurred, and the values the newsroom upholds.

Tip 17: Handling misinformation and disinformation

In the digital age, one of the most pressing threats to electoral integrity and informed public discourse is the rapid spread of misinformation and disinformation. For journalists covering elections, the challenge is twofold: they must avoid inadvertently amplifying false claims while also working proactively to debunk and correct them. This requires a strong commitment to verification, critical thinking, and media ethics.

While the two terms, misinformation and disinformation, are often used interchangeably, they refer to different phenomena. Misinformation is false or misleading information shared without the intent to cause harm, often stemming from confusion, poor sourcing, or honest mistakes. Disinformation, on the other hand, is false information deliberately created or spread to mislead, manipulate public opinion, or serve a political agenda. Both forms pose significant challenges during election periods, when voters rely heavily on the media for accurate and timely information.

Journalists serve as a vital line of defense against these information disorders. Their role is not simply to relay what is said by candidates or parties, but to verify claims, challenge falsehoods, and amplify truth. Doing so effectively requires both a systematic approach to fact-checking and a strong editorial culture that resists sensationalism and prioritizes public trust.

Tip 18: Verification as a professional obligation

Journalists have a professional and ethical responsibility to verify information before publication or broadcast, especially during sensitive times like elections. The old journalistic rule “if your mother says she loves you, check it out” applies doubly when reporting on claims that could influence voter behavior or public trust in democratic institutions.

Verification involves more than just checking with a source. It means cross-referencing facts with multiple independent sources, confirming visual evidence through digital forensics, and checking the authenticity of documents, quotes, and statistics.

Key Steps:

- **Check the origin of the claim:** Who first posted or published it? What is their track record? Is the account verified or is it a possible bot or fake persona?
- **Verify supporting materials:** Does a quote match the transcript? Has a video been edited deceptively? Tools like InVID, Amnesty's YouTube DataViewer, and Google Reverse Image Search can help determine the authenticity of visual content.
- **Use trustworthy databases:** When verifying statistical claims (e.g. on voter turnout or candidate spending), journalists should consult official electoral commission reports, court records, or academic databases.
- **Consult experts cautiously:** Beware of "experts" with political affiliations or no verifiable credentials. Always identify their background and potential conflicts of interest.

Tip 19: Managing the social media information environment

Journalists must actively monitor social media to identify emerging falsehoods and detect trending narratives before they become widely accepted. This involves routinely tracking hashtags, conducting keyword searches, and observing behaviors of known disinformation actors.

While many newsrooms now have dedicated teams focused on social media verification, all journalists should acquire skills enabling them to independently:

- **Check account authenticity:** Analyze the account's creation date, follower patterns, posting frequency, and biographical details.
- **Trace image origins:** Utilize reverse image search tools (such as Google Images, TinEye, or Yandex) to spot reused or misrepresented photographs.
- **Verify video context:** Examine keyframes through tools like InVID or Amnesty International's YouTube Dataviewer to identify original uploads or geolocation information.
- **Detect manipulation indicators:** Be alert to sudden viral spikes, coordinated messaging patterns across multiple accounts, or identical content appearing simultaneously in different languages, as these suggest orchestrated manipulation.

Additionally, journalists should proactively identify pages or accounts systematically distributing content biased toward specific political actors. One practical approach is using publicly accessible resources such as Meta's Ad Library, which offers comprehensive data on political advertising. Journalists can leverage this tool to determine who is financing political advertisements, assess the amount of spending, and analyze targeted demographics by age, gender, and location. This information provides critical insights into political parties' strategic messaging and targeting strategies, enabling reporters to reveal hidden influences shaping public opinion on social media platforms.

4.3 The Election Campaign has started

Balanced and equitable media coverage of all political parties and candidates is not merely a professional responsibility; it is a democratic imperative. Especially in transitional democracies like Albania, where trust in institutions remains fragile, the media's role in creating a fair and informed electoral environment cannot be overstated. This responsibility takes on greater importance during the intense and often emotionally charged campaign period, where every gesture, statement, or omission by a media outlet can be interpreted as favoring one side over another. The Albanian media ecosystem is marked by competing interests, political affiliations, and varying levels of professional integrity. In this environment, ensuring that all parties and candidates are given equitable space requires strategic planning, editorial discipline, and institutional commitment.

The following section elaborates on the challenges and principles of ensuring balance in electoral coverage and provides actionable insights for journalists and editors.

Tip 20: Equal access to airtime, debates, and interviews

Equitable access to media platforms is a cornerstone of electoral fairness. In Albania, both the Electoral Code and guidelines from AMA emphasize the need for balanced airtime and inclusion across all platforms. Yet, enforcement often lags behind these standards.

Editorial managers must recognize that balance is not only about quantity but about tone, prominence, and context. An interview that subtly mocks a candidate, or a debate where the moderator sides with one party, undermines the integrity of the process.

Tip 21: Responding to press conferences and soft news events

Campaigns rely on what is often called "soft news", photo ops, ceremonial visits, or friendly interviews, to shape a favorable image of their candidates. These are designed to create positive associations rather than foster critical thinking. While these events are not inherently unethical, their overrepresentation distorts electoral narratives.

Journalists must not avoid covering such events altogether, but they must contextualize them. If a candidate unveils a new school project, the media should ask: Was the project budgeted or promised years ago? Is the initiative funded by the municipality or the central government? Have similar projects been completed in the past?

Moreover, every statement made at a press conference deserves scrutiny. Journalists should follow up on key claims, seek expert opinions, and crucially, ask other candidates for comment. This is how balance is achieved: not by muting voices, but by expanding the range of perspectives included.

Tip 22: Ensuring accuracy, verifying sources, and preventing misinformation

Misinformation is a systemic threat to electoral integrity. In Albania's fragmented media environment, rumors can circulate rapidly, especially via online portals and social media. Journalists must develop rigorous verification protocols to counteract this trend.

Verification involves cross-checking claims with official records, corroborating information with multiple sources, and flagging content that appears coordinated or suspicious. In particular, journalists must be cautious when citing so-called experts who may be affiliated with political interests.

Favoritism can be subtle, such as always featuring one candidate in flattering contexts or sourcing experts from ideologically aligned think tanks. Proactive policies help surface and correct such imbalances.

Ensuring balanced and equitable coverage of candidates is not a checkbox exercise, it is a sustained commitment to democratic values. In Albania's dynamic media and political landscape, the pressure to pick sides or chase sensational stories is real. But it is precisely during election periods that the media's role becomes most consequential.

Tip 23: Covering campaign rallies and speeches

Campaign rallies and political speeches are among the most visible components of electoral campaigns. They are designed to energize supporters, attract media attention, and amplify a party's message to undecided voters. These events are highly staged, performative, and carefully orchestrated to maximize visual impact and emotional resonance. While they are legitimate aspects of the democratic process, they also carry a high risk of becoming vehicles for propaganda, misinformation, and political spectacle if not reported responsibly.

The role of the journalist is not to act as a passive recorder or publicist but as a critical observer and contextual interpreter. Media professionals covering rallies must approach these events with both respect for their political significance and a healthy skepticism about the narratives being presented. This section provides detailed guidance on how journalists in Albania can navigate the challenges of covering campaign rallies and speeches in a way that upholds journalistic integrity and supports informed democratic participation.

Tip 24: Crowd dynamics and the spectacle of support

Rallies are inherently performative events. Candidates aim to demonstrate momentum and legitimacy through crowd size, enthusiasm, and optics. But numbers can be misleading, and emotions can be stage-managed. Therefore, reporting must not rely solely on what campaign organizers claim.

Journalists should avoid citing attendance figures unless they can be independently verified. If no verification is possible, the report should note the source of the estimate (e.g., "according to party officials"). Where possible, provide wide-angle shots or panoramic views to let audiences judge for themselves. Describe who attended: Were there buses bringing in supporters from other cities? Was the crowd demographically diverse, or did it reflect a narrow slice of the population?

Anecdotal interviews with audience members can enrich reporting by providing insight into why people attended and how they perceived the candidate's message. Similarly, canvassing opinions from citizens outside the rally venue can offer a useful counterpoint and mitigate the echo chamber effect.

Tip 25: Fact-checking and real-time analysis

Many campaign speeches are delivered live and broadcast instantly. This creates pressure on journalists to report quickly, sometimes without adequate time to verify claims. However, speed must not override accuracy.

Journalists should identify in advance which claims are likely to be repeated, such as those about economic growth, unemployment rates, or foreign investment, and have pre-researched data on hand. When a speaker makes a verifiable claim, the follow-up story or broadcast should clearly indicate whether the statement was factual, misleading, or false.

Media organizations should consider deploying live fact-checking teams during key rallies. When this isn't possible, reports should include disclaimers such as "this claim has not been independently verified" and should follow up with clarification as soon as possible.

Tip 26: Reporting on disruptions or irregularities

Journalists should also report on unusual or newsworthy incidents at campaign events. Was the rally disrupted by protestors? Were there signs of tension, arrests, or restrictions on media access? If so, these elements are integral to the story.

However, journalists must also verify who was behind the disruption. Was it spontaneous or coordinated? Was it a form of legitimate protest or a deliberate attempt to sabotage the event? Unfounded speculation should be avoided. When details are unclear, the report should say so and commit to following up. Campaign rallies and speeches are rich sources of political messaging, voter sentiment, and media content. But they are also carefully orchestrated spectacles that must be covered with diligence, detachment, and critical thinking. Journalists covering such events must resist the temptation to act as megaphones for candidates and instead strive to provide audiences with fact-based, context-rich, and balanced coverage.

Tip 27: Conducting candidate interviews and debates fairly

Candidate interviews and electoral debates are crucial opportunities for journalists to provide the public with meaningful, issue-driven insights into the choices before them. These are moments when the media becomes a direct conduit between politicians and voters, an essential democratic service that must be delivered with fairness, preparation, and professionalism. The way interviews and debates are conducted can shape public perception, set the tone of the campaign, and define which issues dominate the conversation.

This section provides practical guidance for journalists and moderators to ensure that candidate interviews and debates are conducted in a balanced, substantive, and equitable manner. It outlines key techniques for question formulation, preparation strategies, and the principles of fair moderation, all of which are essential for maintaining journalistic integrity and public trust.

Tip 28: Reporting on opinion polls and election surveys

Opinion polls and pre-election surveys are common tools in the coverage of electoral campaigns. When used responsibly, they can provide valuable insight into the public mood, preferences on key issues, or how candidates are performing in the eyes of the electorate. However, polls also carry risks when they are misused, misinterpreted, or reported without context.

Political parties often use polls to shape their messaging, test slogans or ideas, and adjust strategies. They may also promote favorable polling results to create the appearance of momentum or inevitability. Such usage can influence undecided voters and suppress or energize turnout, depending on how the information is framed. Journalists should never treat polling data as neutral; they are political instruments as much as they are sources of information.

Polls must be presented as snapshots of opinion at a given moment, not as forecasts of election outcomes. A well-constructed survey with sound methodology still only reflects public sentiment during a limited timeframe.

Furthermore, journalists must communicate clearly to their audience that polls represent momentary snapshots of public opinion, not predictions or certainties regarding electoral outcomes. Additionally, reporting should transparently convey methodological limitations. For instance, telephone surveys often suffer from nonresponse bias (where certain demographics are harder to reach) or social desirability bias (respondents altering answers based on perceptions of the interviewer's expectations).

When reporting poll results, journalists must explicitly state the methodology used, sample size, margin of error, and dates of fieldwork. Polls should never be presented in isolation. Instead, contextualize findings within broader electoral coverage. For example, if a candidate experiences a 5% increase in polling numbers, explore and explain possible reasons: did they organize a major rally, shift positions on key issues, or receive extensive media attention? Providing context strengthens public understanding and confidence in electoral journalism.

4.4 Election Silence

Election day represents the final and most sensitive phase of the democratic process. To protect the integrity of the vote and ensure that citizens can make their decisions without last-minute pressure or manipulation, electoral legislation in many countries, including Albania, imposes a mandatory "silence period." This is a timeframe, 24 hours before and during the day of voting, when all political promotion, campaigning, and media coverage of candidates and parties must cease.

The purpose of the silence period is to give voters time to reflect on their choices in a calm and undisturbed environment, free from campaigning noise, partisan influence, or emotional appeals. Media outlets have a responsibility to respect both the letter and the spirit of this regulation.

Tip 29: What journalists can and cannot do

During the silence period, newsrooms must ensure that their coverage does not provide any form of electoral advantage to a party, candidate, or platform. This includes direct endorsements, favorable interviews, or republishing campaign messages, even if they were previously aired.

Permissible coverage includes:

- Voter turnout statistics, as released by the Central Election Commission.
- Reporting from polling stations, with a focus on the process, not on candidates.
- Documented irregularities or logistical issues, covered factually and without speculation.
- General observations about voting conditions (e.g. accessibility, weather, or safety).

Prohibited activities include:

- Publishing statements, ads, or messages from political parties or candidates.
- Repeating past campaign promises or slogans.
- Broadcasting interviews with politicians or campaign staff.
- Sharing social media posts from official campaign accounts.

Tip 30: To navigate this period responsibly, journalists should:

- Prepare pre-approved editorial calendars for election day coverage to avoid last-minute decisions that may breach the silence rule.
- Review content scheduled for publication or auto-posting to ensure no campaign material remains active.
- Refrain from publishing opinion pieces or editorials that favor or criticize any candidate.

News organizations should also coordinate closely with their legal advisors or the electoral authorities to remain in full compliance with national regulations. Respecting the election silence period is not only a legal obligation but also a demonstration of editorial discipline and democratic maturity. Journalists must remain vigilant and uphold professional neutrality, especially when emotions are high and political stakes are at their peak.

4.5 Election Day and Vote Counting

Tip 31: Accreditation and access for journalists

Ensuring journalistic access to all phases of the electoral process is vital for transparency, accountability, and public trust. In Albania, media representatives, including both domestic and international journalists, are guaranteed the right to observe and report on elections, including from within polling stations and ballot counting centers. However, this right is subject to specific accreditation procedures overseen by the Central Election Commission (CEC), which are periodically detailed through dedicated decisions issued before each election cycle.

Journalists must obtain official accreditation from the CEC to gain access to electoral facilities such as polling stations, voting centers, and counting venues.

While the exact deadlines and procedural details may vary depending on the electoral cycle, the overarching requirements remain consistent:

- **Application submission:** Media outlets must submit a formal request to the CEC, listing the names and identification details of the journalists and technical staff they seek to accredit.
- **Supporting documentation:** Applications are typically accompanied by proof of employment or assignment from a registered media outlet, as well as identification documents of the individuals seeking accreditation.
- **Issuance of badges:** Once approved, the CEC issues personal accreditation badges. These must be visibly worn at all times when accessing polling units or count centers.

Tip 32: Reporting from polling stations

Election day offers journalists a unique opportunity to witness and report on the democratic process in action. Being present at polling stations provides not only visual and narrative content but also a sense of connection between the public and the mechanisms of democracy. However, this access comes with significant responsibility. Journalists must be keenly aware of the legal, ethical, and procedural boundaries that govern their presence at polling places. In this highly sensitive environment, even well-intentioned reporting can easily cross a line, jeopardizing voter privacy, disrupting the process, or unintentionally disseminating misinformation.

Tip 33: Responding to irregularities

Occasionally, journalists may witness behavior that raises questions, be it procedural delays, protests, or alleged misconduct. While it is part of the journalist's job to report such events, this must be done with caution. Unverified claims, premature publication of rumors, or lack of context can cause panic or misinformation.

For example, if a journalist observes a voter claiming to be denied access to the station, they must:

1. Speak with the station chair or election commissioner for official clarification.
2. Include both the complaint and the official explanation if reporting on the event.
3. Avoid sensationalizing the incident before facts are confirmed by the CEC.

Tip 34: Narrative approach

When covering irregularities, the journalist's task begins with observation, not assumption. For example, if a group of citizens claims they were turned away from voting, the journalist should first seek clarification from the local election commission staff. What was the reason? Was there a misunderstanding or a genuine error? This information should be part of the coverage, not just the complaint.

Similarly, if political party representatives allege misconduct, journalists should ensure that opposing views are presented and that the CEC or local commissions are asked for comment.

Where physical conflict or technical disruption occurs, such as ballot paper shortages or power outages, journalists should:

- Describe the event factually, including the time, place, and what was witnessed firsthand.
- Include comments from official sources and, where possible, observers.
- Avoid framing the issue in accusatory or speculative terms.

Tip 35: Reporting election results accurately

In the final stages of the electoral process, as the ballots are counted and results begin to emerge, journalists play an essential role in translating numbers into meaning for the public. Election night can be a moment of high anticipation and pressure, but it must not become a moment of haste or speculation. Accuracy, transparency, and responsibility should define every piece of content produced during this sensitive period.

Reporting results, whether preliminary or final, is not only about relaying numbers but also about communicating them with clarity, impartiality, and context. The legal framework in Albania stipulates that the Central Election Commission is the only body authorized to declare official results. Journalists must therefore avoid announcing or implying final outcomes before the competent authorities have done so.

Moreover, distinguishing between partial and final counts is critical. Many newsrooms are tempted to "call" races based on trends or early tallies. This practice can mislead the public, influence perceptions, and even affect the behavior of political actors or supporters. Instead, journalists should emphasize the provisional nature of results, explain the counting procedures, and rely on official updates.

A comprehensive and responsible approach to election result coverage also involves providing analysis beyond raw numbers. Voter turnout, invalid ballots, changes from previous elections, and regional trends all contribute to understanding the broader political picture. Importantly, such context must be offered without editorializing or projecting bias.

Tip 36: Announcing official results and outcomes

Once the voting has concluded and the ballots have been counted, the final and perhaps most public-facing responsibility of journalists covering elections begins: reporting the official results. This step is not merely a matter of relaying numbers. It is a civic function, anchoring public understanding of electoral outcomes, reducing confusion, countering disinformation, and reinforcing institutional trust in the process.

The certified results, as announced by the Central Election Commission, constitute the authoritative conclusion to the election cycle. These results include not just who won or lost, but also detailed data such as seat allocation per constituency, national vote share, turnout figures, invalid or blank ballots,

and distribution by gender or age, when available. Accurately and clearly communicating this data to the public is a matter of democratic importance.

Journalists must understand that their reporting at this stage directly contributes to public legitimacy. In many cases, it is the media that first delivers results to a wide audience, and how those results are presented can affect public perception, particularly in tightly contested races or regions with a history of political tension. Misreporting, over-simplification, or omission of key data risks not only damaging a media outlet’s credibility but also undermining the very democratic process that elections are meant to uphold.

In the race to be “first,” some media outlets have at times shared preliminary or unofficial results as if they were final, without waiting for official confirmation from the CEC. This practice not only creates confusion but can also trigger unnecessary disputes and misinformation campaigns. Premature declarations, especially those not attributed to the electoral authority, can delegitimize the process and, in extreme cases, spark social unrest.

Beyond reporting raw numbers, journalists must also interpret them for a broad audience. What does a shift in voter turnout indicate? What does a change in the number of seats held by a party mean for legislative coalitions? Has gender representation increased? Did new parties break through, or did independent candidates win unexpectedly? Did any voting irregularities affect results in specific regions? This analysis should be grounded in facts, not speculation. Drawing from expert interviews, historical comparisons, or official CEC briefings can help journalists contextualize outcomes without editorializing them.

Tip 37: Recommendations for reporting official results

- Use official sources: Quote directly from CEC announcements or certified press releases. Include timestamps and data release times.
- Break down the results:
 - Show vote share (%)
 - Seat allocation (national and local)
 - Voter turnout (compared to past elections)
 - Notable trends (e.g., youth participation, female representation)
- Include contextual analysis:
 - Did a party gain or lose compared to last cycle?
 - Did turnout increase in key battlegrounds?
 - What implications might the results have on governance?
- Avoid sensationalism: Avoid headlines like “Shock Victory!” or “Devastating Loss!” unless supported by factual evidence and proportionate analysis.

Tip 38: Covering reactions and developments

Candidates react, supporters celebrate or protest, and political formations begin the process of transitioning to power or reassessing their roles. For journalists, this moment is as delicate as it is decisive. Reporting during this period requires clarity, neutrality, and a deep awareness of the impact that media coverage can have on public perception and national cohesion.

Victory speeches are moments of triumph, but they are also public statements with national resonance. They can call for unity or escalate division. Similarly, concession speeches, when offered, play a critical role in affirming democratic values. Media coverage of such events should be accurate, contextual, and never overly celebratory or disparaging.

Journalists must:

- Quote winning and conceding candidates verbatim and in context.
- Avoid framing stories in triumphalist or overly dramatic terms.
- Clarify whether a concession was formally given or notably absent.

Tip 39: Key self-assessment questions for journalists and editors

Once an election cycle ends, newsrooms have a responsibility to reflect on their coverage, not as an afterthought, but as a crucial step in reinforcing journalistic integrity. The first question should always be: *Were we accurate?* Every name, number, and claim must have been verified. Accuracy builds trust, and it's non-negotiable.

Next, journalists must consider balance. Did we present diverse perspectives fairly, or did tone and airtime unintentionally favor one side? Impartiality is more than presenting two sides, it's about reflecting the complexity of the political landscape without bias. Ethical conduct matters just as much as the story itself. Were our methods lawful and responsible? Did we respect privacy, protect sources, and avoid manipulation? Journalism's credibility rests on how information is obtained, not just how it's delivered.

Importantly, was our reporting voter-focused? Did it help citizens understand their choices, reflect their concerns, and equip them to vote with confidence? Stories must serve the public, not just amplify party messages.

Equally vital is the context. Did we portray events truthfully, avoiding distortion or spectacle? And did we cover what truly mattered, like marginalized voices, campaign finance, or misinformation, not just headline moments?

4.6 Accountability Journalism After Elections

Election coverage doesn't end when the polls close. In fact, a journalist's democratic duty arguably intensifies in the aftermath. Accountability journalism ensures that the promises made during the campaign do not dissolve into rhetoric once candidates take office. This form of reporting strengthens public trust in the media and contributes to a more transparent political culture.

- Avoid personal vendettas or appearing as a political adversary. Accountability journalism must remain objective and verifiable.
- Do not generalize failure from a single policy into a narrative of overall incompetence without evidence.
- Pay attention to how power is being transitioned and exercised, particularly if there are signs of authoritarian overreach, nepotism, or institutional erosion.

Accountability journalism after elections is rooted in rigorous follow-up reporting, thorough fact-checking, and long-term observation. While electoral journalism may focus on campaign messages and competition, post-election journalism pivots to performance and impact.

What next?

- Track promises made during the campaign. Maintain a database of key policy proposals and commitments by candidates. Follow up periodically on their progress.
- Focus on implementation. Investigate whether passed legislation or reforms align with initial promises and whether they are being enforced effectively.
- Use public data and documents. Budget allocations, parliamentary voting records, and institutional decisions are rich sources for follow-up journalism.
- Engage expert voices. Legal analysts, civil society actors, economists, and policy professionals can help contextualize outcomes and identify broken or fulfilled promises.

Glossary of Terms

Accreditation: The official authorization granted by the Central Election Commission (CEC) that allows journalists and media workers to access polling stations, counting centers, and other electoral venues. Accreditation confirms the journalist's professional status and must be visibly displayed during reporting.

Administrative Complaint: A formal complaint filed by electoral subjects or observers regarding violations of electoral law or irregularities. These are adjudicated by the Complaints and Sanctions Commission.

Audiovisual Media Authority (AMA): Albania's national regulator for the audiovisual sector, responsible for supervising both public and private broadcasters. During elections, AMA monitors political content on TV and radio and submits reports to the CEC.

Campaign Silence: The legally mandated period just before and during election day in which political advertising, campaigning, and the publication of exit polls are prohibited to ensure voter reflection time.

Central Election Commission (CEC): The Central Election Commission, Albania's highest election authority responsible for organizing elections, certifying results, accrediting media, and enforcing electoral law.

Defamation: Civil or criminal offense involving the dissemination of false statements that harm a person's dignity or reputation. Journalists must avoid defamatory content, especially during campaigns.

Disinformation: False or misleading information deliberately spread to deceive or manipulate public opinion. Common during election cycles, it undermines informed decision-making.

Election Observation: The process of monitoring elections by accredited observers or journalists to ensure transparency and fairness in the electoral process.

Election Results: The certified election results are officially announced by the CEC after all votes are counted and legal disputes are resolved.

Electoral Code: The primary legal framework governing elections in Albania. It includes provisions on voting, media conduct, campaign finance, complaints, and sanctions.

Electoral Subject: Any political party, coalition, or independent candidate officially registered to participate in elections.

Exit Poll: A survey conducted on Election Day asking voters whom they voted for. Results are restricted from publication during the blackout period before polls close.

Fact-Checking: A verification process whereby journalists assess the accuracy of claims made by candidates, officials, or circulated in media. Integral to combating misinformation.

Hate Speech: Any form of communication that incites violence, discrimination, or hostility against individuals or groups based on race, ethnicity, religion, gender, or orientation. Prohibited under criminal law.

Incitement to Violence: The act of promoting or encouraging violent acts through speech or media. Prohibited by law and ethically unacceptable.

Complaints and Sanctions Commission (CSC): The Complaints and Sanctions Commission within the CEC, responsible for reviewing electoral complaints and imposing legal penalties.

Media Monitoring: The systematic review of political media content during election campaigns by AMA and CEC to ensure fairness and legal compliance.

Paid Content: Sponsored media such as political ads that must be clearly labeled and differentiated from editorial or news content.

Polling Station: The designated location where citizens cast their ballots. Media access is regulated, and interference with the process is prohibited.

Recount: A repeat counting of ballots due to suspected irregularities or official complaints. Ordered by the CEC or CSC.

Transition of Power: The period after elections when elected officials take office. Journalists are expected to report responsibly and monitor policy transitions.

Unofficial Results: Vote counts or projections not certified by the CEC. Must be labeled as such and reported with caution.

Resources

[Reporters Without Borders, 2015 Edition;](#)

[Journalists' Guide to Ethical Election Reporting, 2023;](#)

[International Center for Journalists;](#)

[Guidelines on Ethical and Professional Media Election Reporting in Albania, 2023;](#)

[Handbook On Media Monitoring for](#)

[Election Observation Missions, 2012;](#)

[Handbook for civil society organisations, Reporting on elections, 2016;](#)

[Election guidelines, 2015;](#)

[Covering elections, Media making their mark at election time, 2013;](#)

[Covering elections: Journalist safety kit, 2022.](#)

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