

Annex F – Media Analysis

Crime-State Nexus (CSN) Project: media reliability assessment

1. The analysis provided in the original referral case (submitted to the SSHD on 12 July 2022) used to recommend BERISHA's exclusion in July 2022, which was included as Annex 1 to the submission to the SSHD recommending BERISHA's exclusion, considered open-source media reporting from a number of sources that indicated BERISHA's ties to criminality and corruption.
2. This document therefore provides a joint assessment from the CSN team and the UK Embassy in Tirana of the reliability of these sources. In so doing, this assessment makes use of the expertise and knowledge of both UKG teams in order to make an effective and accurate assessment of each media source's reliability.

Balkan Insight

3. The most significant source of media reporting that we have considered is Balkan Insight. According to its website, Balkan Insight is the English-language website of the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN). BIRN was established in 2004 as a network of non-governmental organisations that promoted freedom of speech, human rights and democratic values in Southern and Eastern Europe. BIRN has a network structure whereby local independent organisations that provide country-specific expertise sit under an umbrella organisation called the Balkan Investigative Regional Reporting Network (BIRN HUB). According to its website, BIRN provides "objective and timely reporting" on issues including media freedom, transitional justice, rule of law, organised crime and corruption.¹
4. As BIRN's "flagship" English-language website, Balkan Insight provides daily news, analysis, and investigations on key countries across Southern and Eastern Europe, where BIRN's network has a presence. This includes Albania.²
5. We consider Balkan Insight to be a reliable source. This is for a number of reasons:
6. **Awards and recognition** – we assess that the fact that BIRN has won a very large amount of awards, on highly relevant subject matter, and from a range of prestigious sources, is a strong indication that BIRN is a reliable source. Since its inception in 2004, BIRN and its journalists have won well over 100 awards. This includes awards from a range of well-respected institutions and bodies including the EU, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Human Rights House, the

¹ <https://balkaninsight.com/about-birn/>

² <https://balkaninsight.com/about-birn/>

European Press Prize, UNICEF, the German Society for International Change (GIZ), and the UNDP. BIRN have also received awards for their Albania-specific and corruption-specific work, and for their ability to deliver excellent investigative journalism with neutral coverage. For example, BIRN journalist Lindita Cela won Central European Initiative (CEI) and the South East Europe Media Organisation's (SEEMO) 2016 award for best investigations on corruption and organised crime. In 2009 CEI and SEEMO also awarded BIRN Albania's editor Besar Likmeta their Outstanding Merits in Investigative Journalism award. In 2020 the International Chamber of Commerce in Albania awarded BIRN Albania its Integrity Award, for "enabling high quality investigative journalism, full coverage and neutrality of current events in the country related to the implementation of the rule of law, and for contribution to the further development of democracy in Albania." The EU Investigative Journalism Award for Albania was awarded to Klodiana Lala, a BIRN Albania contributor, due to her investigative story revealing organised crime's extensive role in vote-buying in Albania and the involvement of high-profile politicians.³

7. **Funding and donors** – presumably because of the high-quality of BIRN reporting and journalism, BIRN has received funding from a range of government and non-government organisations that are committed to freedom of the press, the rule of law, democracy and accountability. This includes but is not limited to: the UK Government, the Swiss Government, the Dutch Government, the Swedish Government, the Austrian Government, The Danish Government, the EU, the US, the UN, Freedom House, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, the Open Society Foundation, Reporters Without Borders, and Civitates.⁴ Again, the fact that BIRN is funded by a wide range of donors indicates widespread acceptance of their reliability. It also mitigates any risk that they might disproportionately reflect the views of any one donor.

8. **Personnel** – examples of awards that specific BIRN journalists have won have already been provided above. But it is also worth noting that the Chairman of BIRN's board is Tim Judah, a journalist for The Economist and who has formerly reported for the BBC, the Times, and other well-respected media outlets. He has also written several well-respected books on the Western Balkans region and is viewed as an authority on the subject.⁵ ⁶ ⁷ BIRN's board is comprised of other well-respected subject-matter experts such as Per Byman, the managing director of the international humanitarian organisation, NRC Fluchtlingshilfe Deutschland and who has experience supporting human rights and

³ <https://balkaninsight.com/awards/>

⁴ <https://birn.eu.com/about-birn/donors/>

⁵ <https://birn.eu.com/people/tim-judah/>

⁶ <https://balkaninsight.com/2010/01/25/the-serbs-history-myth-and-the-destruction-of-yugoslavia/>

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tim_Judah

democratic reform.⁸⁹ The fact that BIRN's leadership is comprised of well-respected subject-matter experts is again indicative that it is a reliable media source.

9. **Collaboration and partnerships with other respected media outlets** – Balkan Insight's website lists a range of well-respected international media organisations as partners. This includes but is not limited to: Al Jazeera, the BBC, the Guardian, the Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), and the European Broadcasting Union.¹⁰ It also states that its stories are regularly republished by media organisations The Economist, Le Monde, Der Standard, The Independent, and others, and that its journalism is regularly cited in academic and parliamentary reports from prestigious organisations including Oxford University, Yale University, the European Parliament, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and more.¹¹ This again supports the assessment that Balkan Insight is a reliable source of information.

Shqiptarja

10. Shqiptarja is an Albanian-language national online (and formerly-print) media outlet. It is owned by Carlo Bollino, an Italian journalist and former correspondent for the Italian news agency ANSA. Bollino moved to Albania in 1993 and worked as a correspondent and executive for the daily newspaper Gazeta Shqiptare, News 24 and Balkanweb.com. These three outlets were owned by an Italian media company, Edisud LLC, in which Bollino was a director. In 2011 Edisud sold these media companies to a local company, Focus Group. Bollino then founded Shqiptarja in 2011 and subsequently the 24-hour news TV station, Report TV, in 2013.¹²
11. Shqiptarja's website claims that the outlet maintains editorial and political independence.¹³ However, the view of the UK Embassy in Tirana is that the newspaper leans (albeit not excessively) towards the current Socialist government of Albania and is not fully independent. The Embassy notes that it was publicly known but never proven that Bollino set up his new media group with a former Socialist Party MP and supporter of current Socialist Party Prime Minister, Edi Rama. Moreover there is a history of conflict between Bollino and BERISHA. The Embassy assesses that while Bollino played a leading role in Gazeta Shqiptare, News 24 and Balkanweb.com, the three outlets were critical of BERISHA and his government. Bollino's wife has publicly stated that BERISHA was responsible for the acquisition of those media outlets due to its negative

⁸ <https://www.nrc-hilft.de/>

⁹ <https://birn.eu.com/people/per-byman/>

¹⁰ <https://balkaninsight.com/institutions-and-partners/>

¹¹ <https://balkaninsight.com/about-birn/>

¹² [Report TV | Media Ownership Monitor \(mom-gmr.org\)](https://www.report-tv.com/en/media-ownership-monitor-mom-gmr-org)

¹³ <https://shqiptarja.com/faqe/rreth-nesh>

- reporting.¹⁴ Bollino asserts that he was expelled from Albania in July 1995 by BERISHA, who was president at the time, and was only allowed re-entry on condition of abandoning his critical position in the media.
12. This is supported by the Media Ownership Monitor (MOM) for Albania, which is maintained with support from BIRN Albania, Reporters without Borders, and the Global Media Registry.¹⁵ MOM states that Shqiptarja's Italian owner Carlo Bollino "is perceived as close to the ruling Socialist Party and Prime Minister Edi Rama, although he maintains that his media are independent and he is an objective journalist", and that "Bollino has been accused by former Prime Minister Sali BERISHA of benefitting from projects financed by the government. The journalist has rejected the charges as politically motivated."¹⁶ The Embassy notes that Bollino was the curator of two "Bunkart" museums in Tirana examining Albania's communist past, and that the contract to construct these museums was awarded by the Socialist government.
13. Nonetheless, while Shqiptarja's editorial line may reasonably be questioned, this is not to the point that its reporting cannot be relied upon as factually accurate. Based on analysis of the accuracy and validity of their reporting to date, the UK Embassy in Tirana assesses Shqiptarja and Report TV to be important and popular media outlets whose reporting follows some journalistic and ethical standards.
14. A crucial point is the number of articles used and what they are used to show. Only two Shqiptarja articles are referenced in the original referral case submitted to the SSHD. The first article is used to show that Fation Dauti kicked in a door at the Democratic Party's headquarters for BERISHA. The article provides video footage of this occurring. The NCA have separately confirmed this individual as Fation Dauti. BERISHA does not dispute that this happened and instead disputes that he did not know Dauti's identity – see Section IV of the recommendation document for further detail. The second article is similarly referenced to show a still image of Dauti violently kicking in the door for BERISHA. Given that these articles are not relied upon for their narrative of events that day, but only for photographic and video evidence of what transpired, Shqiptarja's pro-Socialist Government tendencies and the implications of this on its overall reliability are not relevant for the purposes of this document.

A2 News

15. A2 is an informative TV and online news organisation that is based in Tirana since 2018 and is an exclusive partner to CNN World.

¹⁴ [Alba Malltezi: Berisha bought News 24 after we broadcast the murders of the Guard on January 21 | JavaNews.al \(javanews-al.translate.goog\)](#)

¹⁵ [Team | Media Ownership Monitor \(mom-gmr.org\)](#)

¹⁶ [Carlo Bollino | Media Ownership Monitor \(mom-gmr.org\)](#)

16. The view of the UK Embassy in Albania is that A2 News is that its reports are accurate and conform to journalistic standards. This is supported by the fact that CNN has agreed to partner with A2 – it would not do so unless it was reasonably confident in the quality of A2’s journalism, and that partnering with A2 would not damage CNN’s own reputation.

Albanian Daily News

17. Albanian Daily News is an English-language online news outlet that provides daily coverage of Albania-focused news, though with some limited coverage of events in the wider Western Balkans and around the world. It is not known to be affiliated to a wider media network. Ownership of Albanian Daily News is also unknown.
18. The UK Embassy in Albania’s view is that Albanian Daily News generally provides balanced, accurate reporting. The one Albanian Daily News article considered as part of the original referral case to support BERISHA’s exclusion in July was cited to demonstrate that the elements of the Democratic Party leadership that were in control at that time (e.g. former leader Lulzim Basha) had alleged BERISHA had used criminal gangs in the violent protests in the January 2022 protests. The article then quotes the official Democratic Party public statement in response to the violent protests, and provides the video that the Democratic Party released to support their allegations that BERISHA had used criminal elements as part of his attempt to take control of the Democratic Party (please note this video is different to the video showing Fatjon Dauti’s involvement at the Democratic Party headquarters provided by Shqiptarja). The fact that the Democratic Party leadership at the time (i.e. former leader Lulzim Basha) made those allegations, and released a video purporting to support those allegations, is well-publicised. The Albanian Daily News article does not provide an editorial view on the veracity of these allegations. Given the content of the article, and given the reason for which it is cited (i.e. to demonstrate that allegations were made, rather than to demonstrate the veracity of those allegations), there is no reason to view this article as unreliable.

Al Jazeera

19. According to its website, Al Jazeera is an independent international TV and online news organisation funded in part by the Qatari government.¹⁷ It is not based in Albania, but does provide reasonably regular coverage of key events in Albania and maintains its own webpage dedicated to Albania.¹⁸ It also has a dedicated Balkans channel, Al Jazeera Balkans.¹⁹

¹⁷ [About Us | Today's latest from Al Jazeera](#)

¹⁸ [Albania | Today's latest from Al Jazeera](#)

¹⁹ [Al Jazeera Balkans | Vijesti, Ekonomija, Tehnologija, Kultura, Sport, Teme, Mišljenja, Video, Programi, Blog, Uživo, Vrijeme](#)

20. Al Jazeera is viewed to be a reliable source of information. The organisation is internationally recognised for high-quality journalism. It publishes its own code of ethics on its website setting out its commitment to adhere to journalistic values, observe transparency, and present a clear, factual and accurate picture.²⁰ In 2022 Al Jazeera Balkans won the Award for the Best Media Outlet in the category of TV Journalism, which is awarded by the Association of Journalists of Bosnia and Herzegovina.²¹

The Express

21. The Express is a UK print and online media organisation. It has no presence in Albania. It is owned by Reach PLC, which owns over 130 UK media outlets.²²

22. The Express is viewed as reasonably reliable. It sets out that it is regulated by the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) and that its journalists abide by the Editors Code of Practice, which sets the benchmark for ethical standards in journalism and is enforced by IPSO.²³ Reach PLC news outlets were involved in a UK phone hacking scandal but this preceded that company's acquisition of The Express in 2018.²⁴ Importantly, the one Express article that this document considers provides factual reporting on Fation Dauti, his history of violence and criminality, and the loss of Dauti's appeal against his exclusion from the UK following the Home Office and NCA's case against him. The article's conclusions are supported by other sources, including documents detailing the decision of the Special Immigration Appeals Commission with regard to Dauti's exclusion.²⁵

The Culture Trip

23. The Culture Trip is an online travel platform that includes articles covering countries' culture and history. It is not a formal media outlet, and is not known to have ties to a wider media network.

24. While the Culture Trip itself cannot therefore be considered a reliable source of information in general, one Culture Trip article that is considered in this document is largely supported by other sources, including a March 2000 article for the International Monetary Fund's

²⁰ [Code of Ethics | Media News | Al Jazeera](#)

²¹ [Al Jazeera Balkans wins Best TV Journalism award | Al Jazeera Media Network](#)

²² <https://www.reachplc.com/about-us>

²³ [About us | Express.co.uk](#)

²⁴ [Reach plc - Wikipedia](#)

²⁵ <http://siac.decisions.tribunals.gov.uk/Documents/outcomes/documents/B9%20OP EN%20Judgment%2025.03.21%20doc.pdf>

journal, Finance and Development,²⁶ and more recent online media reporting.²⁷ All sources confirm that BERISHA's government failed to warn the population or properly supervise the pyramid schemes, and that this led to turmoil and conflict within Albania. The IMF article in fact goes beyond what is stated in the Culture Trip article and notes close ties between BERISHA's government and the pyramid companies – “several of the companies made campaign contributions to the ruling Democratic Party. There were allegations that many government officials benefited personally from the companies.” This is despite the fact it was “widely believed to be engaged in criminal activities—including violating United Nations sanctions by smuggling goods into the former Yugoslavia—that were thought to be the source of the high returns they paid.” The article also notes that when it was suggested the companies may have been surviving by illicitly laundering money, “BERISHA came to their defence.” Given the fact that the Culture Trip article is largely corroborated by other open-source media reporting, it should be considered reliable for these purposes.

Txt Report / Telegrafi

25. Txt Report is an online portal that gathers and consolidates daily news and media from non-English-speaking countries.
26. It is therefore difficult to assess the reliability of Txt Report itself. However, the Txt Report article in question was originally taken from Telegrafi, an Albanian-language news outlet, and translated into English.
27. The initial view from the UK Embassy in Tirana is that in general Telegrafi is less reliable than other media sources. It is a small newspaper based in Tirana, with a small team of three journalists and founded by entrepreneur Agim Ciraku. Based on analysis of Telegrafi's website, the editorial line leans towards the Freedom Party, which is led by the former President and now key member of the opposition, Ilir Meta. However the UK Embassy in Tirana assesses that this appears to be a personal choice and does not find evidence of Freedom Party funding to Telegrafi. The UK Embassy also note that Telegrafi supports the political opposition more widely – including BERISHA. Telegrafi is not viewed to be a professional newspaper based on the quality and bias of the articles it publishes.

However, the article in question provides a brief factual account of the fact that the then-leader of the Democratic Party in Albania, Lulzim Basha, took the decision to remove BERISHA from the Democratic Party in light of his designation by the US State Department (please see Section V of the

²⁶ Christopher Jarvis, “The Rise and Fall of Albania's Pyramid Schemes”, Finance & Development Vol.37 No.1, 2000. [Finance & Development, March 2000 - The Rise and Fall of Albania's Pyramid Schemes \(imf.org\)](#)

²⁷ [How Albania became a pyramid scheme - UnHerd](#)

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recommendation document for more detail on US action). The article then quotes the public statement made by Basha. Based on machine translation of transcripts of this public statement on other media sites, the Txt Report translation is accurate.²⁸ Given this, the article should be viewed as reliable.

²⁸ [US ultimatum, Basha expels Sali Berisha from the PD Presidency Group - MAIN \(politiko.al\)](#)