



## Mediatization of European Union Integration Process

Blerina Gjerazi

Universiteti "Aleksander Moisiu",  
Durrës, Albania

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### 1. Introduction

The process of European integration for the Albanian government is characterized by several stages whose cycle has not yet been completed. The first phase, which began in 1992, focused on economic and trade cooperation with the European Economic Community, to be followed 14 years later by the Stabilization and Association Agreement, the signing of which paved the way for the European Union integration process. The third stage is characterized by some important achievements, where at the end of 2010 the visa regime for Albanians in the Schengen Area was abolished, while in 2014 Albania received the status of EU candidate country. However, the final goal has not yet been achieved. The common denominator of all stages remains "professional and depoliticized administration, strengthening the rule of law, the fight against corruption, the fight against organized crime, the protection of human rights"<sup>21</sup>. The effects of this process have been comprehensive regarding reforms, strategies, government plans and international cooperation. Naturally, this process, which is so important for Albania and Albanians, could not stay out of the media spotlight. Due to the extraordinary impact on the Albanian society, this process has opened a wide discourse in the public opinion and has had the predisposition to be placed as the priority agenda of the day. Political discourse has also influenced the prioritization of this issue in different spheres and levels of society. As society and the public do not have a direct connection to the process, much of the news, events and information about integration is conveyed through the media. The media in this case is not only the mediator for conveying information about the European integration process, but also enjoys the potential to influence public opinion through mediatization. Krotz (2007) depicts mediatization as a "metaprocess that affects democracy, society, culture, politics"<sup>22</sup>. While Lundby (2009) adds that "it does not simply refer to an ongoing process that evolves throughout history, but to developments that are highly contemporary"<sup>23</sup>. From this point of view, the media discusses historical contexts, reports the developments, integrates them into the daily events based on the respective features of the type of communication.

When political information is produced about the European integration process, liaison with the public is made through the media. The way politics and society are portrayed often depends on the way media reports and selects the information that will transmit to the public. The development of political, social and media events on the other hand cannot be seen as separate parts, especially when it comes to processes. In addition to personal experiences, we see the world through the lens of media interaction, moreover on important issues such as European integration.

However, when discussing about the process of European integration, a standard question arises, such as at

<sup>21</sup> *Rrugëtimi i Shqipërisë drejt Bashkimit Europian (Albania's journey towards the European Union)*. <https://www.eupolicyhub.eu/rrugetimi-i-shqiperise-drejt-bashkimit-europian/>. Published on September 13, 2017

<sup>22</sup> Krotz, F. (2007). The meta-process of "mediatization" as a conceptual frame. In: *Global Media and Communication*, Nr. 3, pg. 257

<sup>23</sup> Knut, L. (2009). *Mediatization: Concept, Changes, Consequences*, Peter Lang Publishing, Inc New York, pg. 70

which Europe do we want to join? The UK's exit from the union, the growing threats from terrorism, the Covid-19 pandemic and most recently the war in Ukraine highlighted problems within the European community and posed current and future challenges. The notion of the EU as a "two-level game" analyzes the effects of local and international interaction which are different.<sup>24</sup> In times of crisis, the "conceptualization of bargains", and the issue of the prevalence between the interest of one nation over the interest of the whole union have proved that solutions and reactions have not been easy.<sup>25</sup> While the theory of intergovernmentalism explains integration "as a result of cooperation and competition between national governments", Andrew Moravcsik's liberal intergovernmental model presents national governments as key actors in the integration process who have clear ideas about their preferences<sup>26</sup>. Whereas, the neo-functionalism Ernst Haas in his book "The Uniting of Europe" in 1958<sup>27</sup> makes effort to explain how cooperation in specific sectors of economic policy can lead to greater economic integration in Europe and then to wider political integration. Multi-level governance, one of the newest theories about the European Union, assesses "EU policy-making as unequal and often changing"<sup>28</sup>. So, even in the theoretical prospect different perspectives on the EU have been presented. Controversial public issues around the European Union, constant changes, but also internal problems have raised skepticism of the candidate countries about the integration. The statement of the Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama<sup>29</sup> and the Deputy Prime Minister for European Affairs in Northern Macedonia Nikola Dimitrov<sup>30</sup> after the refusal to open the negotiations demonstrate the skepticism, but also a kind of frustration due to the long wait. So, the issues of European integration but also Europe itself as a concept raise debates, promotes arguments and attitudes, which are broadcasted on media screens. Lundby (2009) draws our attention to the fact that "the material and logical characteristics of the media represent the conditions for the possibility of forms of collective and personal organization, of knowledge, but also of social organization."<sup>31</sup>

In this context, the purpose of this paper is to find out how the mediatization of Albania's European integration process takes place and which issues of European integration are framed on television stations. In addition, how the perspectives and challenges of the European Union are portrayed and reported in the media, and how media links (mediates) political communication with the public. The data collected from the monitoring of the two main TV stations in Albania, Top Channel and Klan TV, have influenced the elaboration and analysis of the case study of whether the media can be considered as agents of portrayal and representation of the European integration process, where through reports and information transmit to the public the perspectives and challenges of this process, but at the same time identify other issues related to the European Union.

## 2. Articulation of European Integration Issues in the Media

European Union - Western Balkans Summit held in Slovenia and the Progress Report of the European Commission on Albania were the two main events reported by the media during October 2021. As conductors of information and political decisions, the media compete with each other to influence public opinion. This rivalry is exploited by political elites to convey messages and mobilize attitudes through media networks. Launching messages through the media means not only the institutionalization of the media as a mediator with the public, but at the same time it means using the media as an "objectivity apparatus" to mediate issues. In terms of European integration, from a personal point of view more than a process, mediatization arises as a result of a reciprocal political-media product, where Burke's dramatic emphasis on "agent, scene, act, agency and purpose"<sup>32</sup> helps us to analyze the level of performance from both parties. Televisions have a performative nature which stimulates the interpretive approaches of the actors who participate in them. Let us take

<sup>24</sup> Knopf, J. W. (1993). *Beyond Two-Level Games: Domestic-International Interaction in the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Negotiations*. *International Organization*, 47(4), 599–628. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2706940>

<sup>25</sup> Here we can bring as an example the case of the crisis in Greece and the sanctions of the European side against a state to protect the general interest of the European community.

<sup>26</sup> Moravcsik, A. (1998). *The Choice for Europe, Social Purpose & State Power*. Cornell University Press; 1st edition p.18

<sup>27</sup> Haas, E. (1958). *The Uniting of Europe: Political, Social and Economical Forces 1950-1957*. University of Notre Dame Press, Indiana

<sup>28</sup> Jensen, S. M. (2015). *Multilevel Governance Theory*. Center for International Forestry Research <http://www.jstor.com/stable/resrep02152.5>

<sup>29</sup> "Rama: BE po turpërohet me mbrojtësit më të vendosur", (*Rama: The EU is ashamed of its most determined defenders*). TV Klan 25/10/2021, [www.klantv](http://www.klantv)

<sup>30</sup> "Nikola Dimitrov pro Ballkanit të Hapur, integrimi po vonohet", (*Nikola Dimitrov pro Open Balkans, integration is delayed*) TV Klan 01/10/2021, [www.klantv](http://www.klantv)

<sup>31</sup> See *ibid* 3, pg. 68

<sup>32</sup> Griffin, E. et al. (2015). *Vështrim i parë mbi Teorinë e Komunikimit*, Educational Centre, Tiranë, pg. 15

as an illustrative example the statement of the Prime Minister Edi Rama during an interview for the German national television<sup>33</sup>.

Extracts from the interview:

**Journalist:** Albanian Prime Minister Rama was elected head of government for the third time. It has been in the headlines in the international media because there are more women than men in his cabinet and has offered to accept four thousand refugees from Afghanistan. EU entry alone is not going well. Prime Minister Rama, you are coming from Slovenia, from the EU summit and there were practically handshakes and nice words. Are you disappointed?

**Edi Rama:** No, because I was not really expecting anything in return. In the past we would have been disappointed, but we have learned that Europe is not in its best shape and we understand that, so we simply continue our work. As you know, we must definitely create an Albania that carries the same values and standards as the European Union. And not because Berlin, Paris, Brussels force us, but because this is what we want for our children.

According to the interpretation that can be given to this part of the interview, it is identified that the fulfillment of the obligations for membership in the European Union does not constitute a specific objective only for this purpose, but first of all it is an obligation for the Albanian citizens. Unraveling it based on Burke's model, Prime Minister Rama is the messenger-agent. The environment where the interview takes place, the symbols, the decor, the presentation is the scene. The attitude of Prime Minister Rama to convey a message to the public that is considered appropriate to him, constitutes the act. The use of gestures, symbolic and implied communication, including the typical syllogism of the prime minister is the tool, the agency. The aim is to show to the public that values and standards should not be considered only as matters for European integration, but as standards that Albanians deserve, which is, the goal. It should be understood that the whole scene is prepared for the public, pre-presented and oriented based on the journalist's questions. But not only that. Political actors themselves have a high awareness of media logic and the process of mediatization and consequently choose "phrases that are attractive to the journalist and adopt them in their behavior and communication."<sup>34</sup> This form of communication allows the media to produce news based on the statements of key political actors and to focus on those issues that are identified as having news appeal, following the commercial line.

A connection of this media behavior is also noticed from the monitoring of 167 news on Top Channel and TV Klan. As shown in table no. 1, out of 167 news reports about the European integration process, 26% of them are based on statements of high European officials, 14% refer to the statements of the Prime Minister of Albania, while 12% are statements of Albanian officials who have specific roles in this process, such as for example the Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs. So, about 48% of the news are drafted based on the attitudes of political actors, whose perceived competence and media reporting tone influences the way the public should understand a certain issue or event. An interesting fact was observed during the monitoring period, where 30% of the news focused on the current challenges of the European Union. According to divided categories as shown in the table below, the challenges of the European Union also compose the highest number of news reports by the two television stations selected for monitoring. There seems to be a correlation between the statement of the Albanian Prime Minister "that Europe is not in its best shape" with the selection and content of the news presented to the public. Through the construction of the agenda, the media tells the public what to think about, explains McCombs.<sup>35</sup>

**Table 1:** Issues related to the European Integration Process Reported by Media

European Commission progress report on Albania	EU – Western Balkan Summit	Statement by the Prime Minister of Albania on the European integration process	Statements of high European officials regarding Albania's integration into the EU	Current challenges of the European Union	Statements of Albanian officials about the integration process	Bulgarian Veto
9 (5%)	8 (5%)	23 (14%)	43 (26%)	51 (30%)	20 (12%)	13 (8%)

Thus, the media can be imagined as an agent of portraying and representing the European integration process.

<sup>33</sup> TV Klan "Integrimi, Rama: Evropa, jo në formën e saj më të mirë. Ne vazhdojmë punën", (Integration, Rama: Europe, not in its best form. We continue the work) 08:27 datw 11/10/2021, <https://tvklan.al/integrimi-rama-evropa-jo-ne-formen-e-saj-me-te-mire-ne-vazhdojme-punen/>

<sup>34</sup> Londo, E. "Marketimi i Fushatave Elektorale në Median Shqiptare", Disertacion për mbrojtjen e gradës shkencore "doktor", Universiteti i Tiranës, Fakulteti i Filologjisë dhe Historisë, Departamenti i Shkencave të Komunikimit dhe Gazetarisë, Tiranë, pg. 20

<sup>35</sup> See *ibid* 13, pg. 377

According to Cottle (2006) when we refer to the media as representative we mean that "they do something (perform) actively by disseminating ideas, images and information".<sup>36</sup> This form of media action mediatizes not only the political reality but also the social one.

### 3. Portraying and Reporting on the Perspectives and Challenges of the European Union

McCombs, when analyzing the levels of the media as determinants of the agenda, calls upon structural features he illustrates through Robert Entman's description: "To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described."<sup>37</sup> In this description it is very interesting the fact of the construction of a reality perceived by the media, as well as the causal form of interpretation. In this context the media takes on a promotional role on issues unknown to the public or on issues that the public has little knowledge of. Through the news selection, its illustrations, the authoritarian model of information mastery is formed, by which it aims to shape attitudes, reactions and beliefs. Adam (2009) states that in conditions when "Europe as an object is very far from the citizens and direct experiences and other sources of information are rare, the potential impact of the media is high."<sup>38</sup> This finding is particularly important when media mobilizes the public on issues that may violate fundamental human rights and freedoms, or may threaten their security and economy. Lack of specialized knowledge creates dependence on the media which in turn has the potential to mobilize the public.

But, there is another aspect about the portrayal of the European Union and a principled division between the political attitude and the citizens. Referring to Eurobarometer surveys, Brüggemann, Michael, Kleinen von Königslöw, Katharina (2007) argue that citizens do not have a proper understanding of the European Union due to lack of information. They further argue that the problem in communication is often attributed to the "lack of a European public sphere: political power has moved to Brussels, but this has not been accompanied by the opening of national public spheres to Europe."<sup>39</sup> The arguments put forward by Adam (2009) regarding the behavior of political elites and citizens towards the European Union stand in the same line. He underlines that public opinions on European integration are well structured, but strongly polarized among citizens. The characteristics of the structuring of public opinion are constructed through the process of mediatization, where the forms of reaction of citizens can be different. So, it is observed that there are two levels about reporting on the perspectives of the European Union: the political perspective which is materialized and mediatized on one side and the public perspective which is revealed through surveys and can be the subject of media reporting, on the other side. But, it is the media which makes "selection, emphasis, exclusion and elaboration"<sup>40</sup> of the news. By selecting from a vast of information, the media puts the emphasis and tone, leaves out some information and through the processing process brings it to the public. So, the public consumes information that is pre-prepared in media newsrooms based on official resources.

But what are the main issues of the European Union that the two monitored media have selected to report to the Albanian public? As mentioned above, out of 167 news analysis, 51 of them or 30% of the news were related to the current challenges facing the European Union. According to media reports, 27% of the news covers the integration of the Western Balkans, 20% the statements and reaction about the war in Ukraine, 17% the energy crisis, 13% the price increase, 13% the issue of migrants and 10% Covid-19. It is reasonable that the integration of the Western Balkans has a higher percentage compared to other issues as a result of the two main factors. First, the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, which, in addition to an extraordinary defacement at the political, economic, and humanitarian levels, has re-introduced Europe's attention to the Western Balkans, considering it as a high-risk alert if Russian aggression escalated. Countries like Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia can be converted into the ensuing conflict between East and West. "The EU

<sup>36</sup> Cottle, S. (2006). *Mediatized Conflict: New Developments in Media and Conflict Studies*. Open University Press. Mc Graw Hill. pg. 13-31.

<sup>37</sup> McCombs, M. E., & Shaw, D. L. (1972). *The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media*. *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36(2), 176–187. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2747787>

<sup>38</sup> Adam, S. (2009). *Bringing the mass media in: the contribution of the mass media for understanding citizens' attitudes towards the European Union*. (KFG Working Paper Series, 4). Freie Universität Berlin, FB Politik- und Sozialwissenschaften, Otto-Suhr-Institut für Politikwissenschaft Kolleg-Forschergruppe "The Transformative Power of Europe". <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-365643>

<sup>39</sup> Brüggemann, et al. (2007): "Let's talk about Europe". *Explaining vertical and horizontal Europeanization in the quality press*, TranState Working Papers, No. 60, Universität Bremen, Collaborative Research Center 597 - Transformations of the State, Bremen

<sup>40</sup> McCombs, M. E., & Shaw, D. L. (1972). *The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media*. *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36(2), 176–187. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2747787>

High Representative Joseph Borrell declared at a press conference on February 27th that the EU is worried that the crisis in Ukraine may spread to the Western Balkans<sup>41</sup>. Secondly, due to Europe's long wait for membership and the frequent reluctance for the integration of the Western Balkan, the countries in region are looking for other integration alternatives. The Albanian Prime Minister, as well as other leaders of the Western Balkan countries, consider the delays in membership unjustified by the European side and are open to other opportunities for cooperation. Open Balkans is the most discussed among the countries of the region.

The second issue covered by the monitored media is the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. It is comprehensible that although the conflict started on February 24, 2022 (the penultimate month of the monitoring period) there is a high intensity of reporting by the Albanian media. Because of this conflict, Europe will probably no longer be the same, European politics will be re-dimensioned, the Western Balkans will be affirmed, and while all this is happening, the public sphere may be left behind in the "trans-nationalization of the political system which remains nationally bound while politics has been Europeanized".<sup>42</sup>

The following three issues reported by the media, the energy crisis, price increase and the issue of migrants have emerged as a result of the war in Ukraine. One of the first effects of the conflict was in the economic sphere. In the context of European countries' economy was rising inflation. Prices of several products have increased along with the fuel price.

It seems that the media attention about the coronavirus and the situation in Europe has decreased. This is logical considering the fact that the latest events affect the information and the short-lived nature of the media product due to its topicality and agenda. This issue may become a media priority in case of another lockdown.

**Table 2:** The main challenges of the European Union reported in the media

Current challenges of the European Union	Price increase	Energy crisis	Immigrant issues	Statements and reaction to the war in Ukraine	Integration of the Western Balkans	Covid-19 Vaccines/ Green Pass
Klan	4	5	4	6	8	3
Top Channel	4	4	2	5	5	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>8 (13%)</b>	<b>9 (17%)</b>	<b>6 (13%)</b>	<b>11 (20%)</b>	<b>13 (27%)</b>	<b>4 (10%)</b>

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusions

The media is linked to various political and social issues. This connection is historically long, explains Hepp (2012) which due to the way it is created and social dynamics in specific conditions tends to influence / demand public reaction. Mediatization as a process is not necessarily a process with negative consequences for society, but it should nevertheless be understood that the media "exerted pressure may change in the context of its use." <sup>43</sup> The potential of civic mobilization by media has been acknowledged by a number of scholars in the field. Nevertheless, the association between media issues and civic mobilization remains an open element of discourse among scholars. This is due to the fact that analyzing issues reveals how the media has structured, constructed, produced and disseminated information. So, the issue is fundamental during the process of mediatization, to proceed after with the discourse of what effect it will create on the public and the purpose of the agent. In this context, referring to the European integration process, there is an increasing attention of the media based on issues. Thus, the media do not report continuously on the European integration process, but are selective based mainly on:

- Important events / meetings - for example EU Summit - Western Balkans
- Public evaluation acts - for example the publication of the European Commission progress report
- Statements of high officials related to the process
- Declarations that can produce news - for example the opinion of the Albanian Prime Minister that "Europe is not in its best form"
- Crisis situations affecting society - for example rising prices across Europe

<sup>41</sup> BiEPAG "Western Balkans: Reactions and Implications of the Russian Aggression of Ukraine". 11 March, 2022. <https://biepag.eu/blog/western-balkans-reactions-and-implications-of-the-russian-aggression-of-ukraine/>

<sup>42</sup> See *ibid* 19

<sup>43</sup> Hepp, A. (2012). *Cultures of Mediatization*, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press

Information selection, storytelling and news report is media typology. The discussion lies in how events are mediatized and whether important political and social processes are media constructions and differ from the perspective of citizens. Riffe et al, (2014) draw our attention to the fact that media content analysis remains an important tool for categorizing all forms of content. In this context, analyzing the content of the media reveals the fact how issues are mediatized, prioritized and the purpose of public coverage. For important issues such as European integration, the analysis of the media process and the performance level of the media should receive higher attention. Hepp (2012) reminds us about the linguistic effects of television, implying one-sided causation, but also the formative forces in everyday practice.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> See *ibid* 23, pg. 54-68