They will save us, or shouldn’t they? An analysis of the role of the international community in the Albanian print media after the January 21st 2011 demonstrations

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Abstract

This article investigates the political controversies related to the role the international community plays and should play in contemporary Albanian politics through an analysis of the media accounts of the January 21, 2011 demonstration. We analyse opinion articles in the mainstream media and find that there are two representations of the political reality that compete for legitimacy: one in favour of the government and the other against it. The picture that emerges from the media accounts is that events, political action and political personalities are subject to the perceived judgement of external actors, whose confirmation or support is taken as the legitimizing factor. Thus, the accepted patterns of power put the international community at the top, from where they control, monitor, confirm or refute political elites. The alternative representation criticizes international intervention as a deterrent to the democratization processes in Albania.

Keywords: media, external actors, politics, control, Albania.

1. Introduction

Since the fall of communism Albania has been undergoing the process of political democratisation. Authors like Bideleux and Jeffries called the type of regime that has been developing and its practices in the country “a rude yet very vigorous democracy of sorts”, in which, despite rough party politics and frequent allegations of electoral malpractice, since 1999 Albanian politicians and voters have not resorted to violence to achieve
political success.\footnote{Robert Bideleux and Ian Jeffries. The Balkans, A post-Communist History. (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 72.} Furthermore, the country has been accepted into NATO in 2009, signed the Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the EU in 2007 and the Visa Liberalisation Agreement with the Schengen counties in December 2010, all of which have been considered positive signs of the democratic consolidation process in the country.

Yet, on the 21\textsuperscript{st} January 2011, according to official reports, twenty thousand people in Tirana demonstrated against the current government denouncing it for electoral fraud and corruption. As a result of confrontation with security forces, three demonstrators were killed, tens of demonstrators and police officers were injured and a fourth person died later of injuries sustained in the confrontation\footnote{Shqip 26.01.2011}. The event gave rise to an outstanding media debate which was focused on the broader effect of the “incident”, and the initial purpose of the demonstration was connected with a myriad of themes such as political violence, the state of democracy in the country and its institutions; all of these were further influenced by the perception of the international community’s role in domestic politics. Commentators were skewed towards two main positions, although at various degrees, the first one being in support of the government and the second against it, which was reflected in two conflicting interpretations and representations of the political reality in Albania. The first one is that of a primitive and violent country and people unable to build a sustainable democratic regime and therefore in need of external international intervention to guarantee the continuity of democracy and prevent any slip back to authoritarianism. The second representation is an understanding of the political situation and political behaviour as proceeding in the context of politics as normal, as long as actors involved have interests and objectives, whereas international intervention is considered as a violation of
the country’s sovereignty and consequently a negative influence for the democratisation process in Albania.

As a result, certain questions emerge: how are these political controversies created? How are media accounts constructed in order to create assumptions and beliefs about specific events, courses of action or political actors? What do they tell us about patterns of power and the attitudes towards these patterns? I argue that through mainstream media discourses such as opinion articles we can identify accepted patterns of power in which the international community is the authority legitimizing or judging as illegitimate the actions of the political elite. The alternative discourse, which is underrepresented in opinion articles in the mainstream media, tries to demarcate Albanians against such influences by supporting the claim that international intervention is influencing negatively in the process of democratisation of Albania.

The study of media discourses is relevant in this context because it might help us understand the formation of public opinion on a particular issue or event. Discourse is, as Fairclough tells us, a mode of action and representation and analyzing it helps political scientists understand positions and attitudes of those that have constructed such discourse. Furthermore, through their language we can construct a picture of the influences that Albanian public opinion is exposed to, and which they employ in order to give meaning to and construct the world around them. In other words, this article will use media as a window on the power patterns in Albania.

Methodologically I focus on the political discourses through which the “essence” of the Albanian society has been constructed. The perspective I have chosen is that of analyzing dominant


discourses present in the mainstream printed dailies with the highest circulation, focusing on the particular case of opinion articles. Analyzing media discourses allows us to understand how language is used to create meaning and represent reality. As we identify patterns of language, we can “show how these constitute aspects of society and the people within it” under the basic assumption that “the language available to people enables and constrains not only their expression of certain ideas but also what they do.” In the specific case of opinion articles, by looking at discourse we see how commentators (and possibly their publishers) see the process of democratisation in Albania and how they want their readers to see it. Although what we see is subject to interpretation, and in an analysis we might be including certain aspects while intentionally excluding some others.

The article is structured in five parts. After the introduction there is an overview of the theoretical debates on discourse and politics, followed by the methodology used to conduct the analysis on the role of the international community, which is the fourth part of the paper. I conclude with a summary of the main findings, explain some of its limits and provide a few suggestions for further research.

2. Discourse and Politics

Politicians now operate within three parallel political environments, each with its own practices and discourses, namely: substantive policy making, also known as elite politics; the hype, in which imagery and mythology are manufactured, also known as mass politics; and the meta-level, in which the political game is planned and managed. In order to understand media discourses and present a plausible interpretation of the underlying power patterns observable within them, we need to see how these three environments interconnect and interact.


Elite politics is conducted by the so-called insiders and semi-insiders. Insiders take the decisions, thus shaping political reality, whereas semi-insiders are their collaborators and act as intermediary between the political elites and the masses. The relationship of the masses with the political elites is complicated, especially so because the elites are usually part of the state, which is a provider of benefits but which can also posit threats to its own citizens. In a democratic environment the state is considered an instrument that works for the people. Nevertheless, it is directed and operates by and through elites who are, in many cases, perceived as if they use the power conferred to them by the masses for their own purposes. This perception is reinforced when the state is seen as working against or neglecting the majority of its own citizens. In the first scenario the citizens recognise the state as legitimate and identify with its structures, whereas in the second the citizens antagonise with the elites that control the state, which means that the relationship between state and citizens resembles the patterns Edelman defined as “Now it is ‘us’ and often it is ‘them’”.

The tension between elite politics and mass politics is facilitated by semi-insiders who are usually well-educated individuals from the middle-class who do not hold any decision-making positions in the state structures but work for the insiders in creating the hype with which the outsiders are presented and expected to be subject to. They work within the media as commentators who serve as interpreters for or persuasive intermediaries between the elites and the masses. Their power exists in the selection and shaping of the themes to be found in political discourse, in an attempt to influence public opinion.

Because of the ubiquity of media in today’s political communication its role is inescapably ambivalent in forming public opinion. The whole political spectacle is constituted by a media continuously constructing and reconstructing issues of public concern, such as social problems, crises, enemies, and

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leaders, thus creating a series of threats and reassurances for the publics concerned with them. Political controversy revolves around and feeds on conflicting interpretations of current political actions and developments. Consequently, media accounts become devices for creating contrasting assumptions and beliefs about the world rather than stating facts. These representations of political reality are used as instruments for winning support and opposition for specific courses of action and for particular ideologies and to stimulate and/or discourage existing frames, which makes them competing representations.

Fairclough recommends that when analyzing language as discourse the scholar has to take into consideration several dimensions: discourse as text, as discursive practice and as social practice. For the purposes of this study, however, the most relevant aspects in analyzing political discourse is to see language from the perspective of a discursive and social practice, that is, as a mode of action and of representation and at the same time shaped and constrained by social structure. Discourse is constitutive in several aspects such as social identities, social relationships and systems of knowledge and belief. Through discourse we can read into and understand how people perceive and describe their own identity, how they understand and construct their relationships towards others, things or institutions, and how they construct their systems of knowledge or belief. As a result of identity, relational and ideational functions, discursive practice contributes to both the reproduction and the transformation of a particular society.

As a social practice discourse has interwoven economic, cultural, political or ideological orientations, without any of them being reducible to discourse. As a political practice, discourse

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12 Ibid, 63.
13 Ibid, 65.
“establishes, sustains and changes power relations and the collective entities between which power relations obtain.”\textsuperscript{14} As an ideological practice, it “constitutes, sustains and changes significations of the world from diverse positions in power relations.”\textsuperscript{15} These practices are not independent “for ideology is significations generated within power relations as a dimension of the exercise of power and struggle over power.”\textsuperscript{16} In other words, language is not a neutral means of reflecting and describing the world,\textsuperscript{17} but a struggle for hegemony, in terms of producing, distributing and consuming texts, a struggle that contributes to the reproduction or transformation of the order of discourse.\textsuperscript{18}

Competing discursive representations try to establish one version of the world in the face of other competing versions, what Fairclough calls establishing or confirming one’s hegemony.\textsuperscript{19} The latter is constructed through the ideology of the power holders and is produced to legitimize their position and claims. Furthermore, “the logic of hegemony presupposes the existence of a social field criss-crossed by social antagonisms and the availability of contingent ideological elements.”\textsuperscript{20} Opinion formation is done through the employment of these ideological elements which operate through the mobilisation of discourse. In this way, by mobilizing meaning the processes of ideology serve also as means of mobilizing consciousness.\textsuperscript{21}

Gamson proposes the combination of competing frames and media practices in forwarding and transforming these “original inputs” with the cultural tools through which people respond and

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{14} Ibid, 67.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Ibid, 67.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Ibid, 67.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Fairclough, \textit{Analyzing}, 86-93.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Ibid
\end{itemize}
assimilate them.\textsuperscript{22} The cultural mechanisms employed in order for the persuasive rhetoric to be more successful are themes of common sense of cultural and historical grounds, which means that in contemporary discourses one often finds the use of past events or stories to describe current ones via the use of parallels of positive or negative similarities and analogies.\textsuperscript{23} These cultural resonances are an expression of the dependence on the past experience in a particular society, the evocation of which provides the resemblance necessary to make the new content easy to capture.\textsuperscript{24} In that cultural past lie some basic determinants of the collective behaviour and hence of public opinion.

However, evoking the past is not enough to gain legitimacy and support because, despite intentionality, the results are dependent on more than one piece of discourse. Thus, public opinion can be explained by culture, but more completely so, if we look at the process of socialisation, the political actors and the specific events.\textsuperscript{25} Post-communist transition, for example, was characterised by exposure to Western perceptions and influences and EU or NATO conditionality, both of which have created new power patterns and hierarchies within societies. The exposure to a post-communist and global world of 'ethnoscapes', 'mediascapes', 'financescapes' and 'ideoscapes' flows\textsuperscript{26} has affected Albanian political, economic and social development even more because of "the contradictory outside influences in the 1990s, as many times in her history before."\textsuperscript{27} Albania’s modern state history presents several instances of struggle against foreign imposition or influence. Such tensions have resurfaced in

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\textsuperscript{23} Billig, \textit{Ideology}.
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the latest period of transition to a democratic regime, which has also been characterised by ongoing re-definition of the political reality.

Furthermore, the initial foreign and humanitarian aid interventions of the 1990s were soon replaced by the new impersonal and depoliticised rhetoric of institutionalism, empowerment and state capacity building. According to this type of discourse, intervention is no longer seen as violating state sovereignty but as a necessity to prevent fragile transitional states from failing in their attempt to democratise and develop economically. David Chandler argues that the basic assumption here is that certain states are limited in their capacity to autonomously democratise. These discourses of international state-building are ideological and serve the purpose of hiding interests of power. In a post-Cold War era, the threats to the Western way of life are no longer articulated as ideological or political but instead as economic and institutional. In this discursive frame the understanding of different capacities serves as apologia for the status quo of international intervention, according to which it becomes paramount to assist weak or transitional states to build the institutional capacities necessary to eliminate threats to democracy.28 The impact of such practices is already visible: sovereignty, for example, no longer demarcates the dividing line between what or who is inside and who is outside a particular political community. Poor countries worldwide as well as eastern European countries, such as Albania, aspiring to join the EU - all easily located in the category of non-Western states - nowadays “lack even the formal capacity to formulate public policy independently of the requirements of international institutions”, having thus been reduced to bodies that respond to external international powers.29

3. Methodology

In this study, I analyzed a selection of opinion articles published in the Albanian daily mainstream newspapers Shekulli, Gazeta Shqiptare, Panorama, Shqip and Mapo between January 21 and 31, 2011. These papers are the widest read in Albania, according to regular surveys conducted by the independent Research Centre Monitor.\(^{30}\) The selected dailies are considered “independent”, although you can trace some political inclination towards the left (Shekulli, Gazeta Shqiptare and Shqip) and right (Panorama and Mapo), which means that the former three would currently be positioned as oppositional to the government, while the latter two as pro-government. Lani and Çupi tell us that free press in Albania emerged as party press, so despite attempts to become independent, “the threads that link the journals with the headquarters of the political parties generally still exist”\(^{31}\).

All selected newspapers reserve one or two pages for editorials, opinions and commentaries, ranging from one to four articles per issue, in which individuals with a public profile comment on the latest issues of concern in the public debate, usually something of a political nature. Although they do not all necessarily embrace the newspaper’s editorial line, articles tend to reflect it extensively. A plausible explanation for the exceptions to the editorial lines might be personal connections or an author’s high public profile which allow certain people to make their opinions more visible in public. The writers range from professional journalists, prominent well-known journalists (or so-called opinionists) to lecturers at the university, professionals and representatives of the civil society and other prominent figures such as writers or artists, who most of the time have some sort of international training or experience. They become important

\(^{30}\) Monitor 2010: 33.

influential political actors, especially when they publish under the umbrella of “independent media”.

Newspaper articles were chosen not only because of the practical ease of collecting the data but also because of “their very ubiquity, coupled with intensity of usage, public attention and political influence.” As a political scientist, the interest in newspaper articles is mainly in their being part of the political communication channels. Furthermore, the section on opinions or commentaries, although presenting individual opinions, are rich in terms of content and allow for a more in-depth analysis and interpretation of the political discourse. Despite their individual character, they do serve as social representations of themes competing for a legitimised position in the Albanian public discourse. They are written by semi-insiders and published in the mainstream media which means that they represent an account of the ruling rhetoric, considering that the ownership of the means of production is the ownership of the means of persuasive rhetoric. They also reflect the constitutive context in which and about which they are articulated. As Mautner puts it, “if you are interested in dominant discourses, rather than dissident or idiosyncratic voices, the major dailies and weeklies are obvious sources to turn to.” Furthermore, categorised as opinions they give us the opportunity to understand the main representations of Albanian politics, and give us a hint of the main discussions in the public opinion, especially considering that they try both to reflect and shape such opinion. In other words,

34 Gill, Discourse, 276.
35 Billig, Ideology, 4.
37 Mautner, Analysing, 32.
38 Fairclough, Analysing, 55.
by analyzing these types of articles we can detect the perceived patterns of power in the country.

As a result of the sample size and the qualitative method of analysis, we cannot know how representative the ideas presented in commentaries are of the general Albanian public opinion. We do, nevertheless, know that “dissemination to large audiences enhances the constitutive effect of discourse – its power that is, to shape widely shared constructions of reality.” Consequently, by analysing the opinion articles in mainstream daily newspapers we will be able to cast light on these discourses, i.e. have a view of the current political discourse in a post-communist country still undergoing the democratisation process such as Albania.

3.1 Data body

The preliminary data collection was conducted on nine papers, covered a period of six weeks and resulted in a data body of 700 articles, which I narrowed down through a cyclical process. The selection was based on three criteria: time period, sale rates, and variety of authors writing in the commentary/opinion section.

After the preliminary analysis, I decided to select 50 articles (10 for each newspaper), which range from approximately 500-2000 words published during the first ten days including January 21. The selection was content-based and format based. I removed from my set most of the shorter articles as well as those without authorship (which were published under the Editorial column). I also chose one or at a maximum two articles from the same author, in the cases when they had published several times during that ten-day period. Finally the relevance of the content of the articles was taken into consideration. For example, Artur Zheji had published three articles in Mapo: “The day after”, “Help us Arvizu!” and “The Honour of the Guard and the Honour of the Soldier.” I kept the first two articles because they give a more comprehensive view of the understanding of the event and what

39  Mautner, Analysing, 32.
40  Ibid, 35.
followed ("The day after"), and of the relationship between Albanians and the international community, through the particular example of the American Ambassador ("Help us Arvizu!"). The selected articles are focused on themes such as the interpretation of the demonstration, causes, effects and responsibilities, predictions and recommendations for the future and interpretations of the follow-up behaviour of the various domestic and international agents.

3.2 Sensitizing concepts and main themes

Following Fairclough’s framework, when analyzing the newspaper articles immediately after the event of January 21 I tried to detect the societal and cultural constraints that shape Albanian discourses and identify how discourse constitutes social identities, relationships and the systems of knowledge and belief in the contemporary Albanian context. I worked with sensitizing concepts, which are fluid concepts, ideas, notions or questions that served as a starting point, which directed my attention with regards to where to look and what to look for. 41 As the literature suggests, sensitizing concepts are easier to refine with the new attributes or even replace completely with new appropriate context-specific ones, thus enabling the researcher to identify the particularities of the context. 42 After the pre-analysis I realised that, apart from the category, the attributes associated with these concepts were important in two ways: first, because as partial propositions they help us construct a more detailed comprehensive concept; and second, because the construction of

41 Herbert Blumer, "What is Wrong with Social Theory?" American Sociological Review. 19: 1. (1954), 3-10.
these concepts is done in two competing frames of representation, which if ignored would confuse our results.\textsuperscript{43}

The sensitizing concepts used for the analysis were violence, legitimacy, reputation, reconciliation, democracy, institutions, the people, elites/leaders within a frame of competing representations for the event in question. During the pre-analysis, I assessed the articles and identified the sentences in which authors mentioned or spoke of the above, while realizing that there were more important concepts dealt with that I had initially incorporated. While all themes are inter-related, the ones relevant for the current paper are the following:

\textit{Reputation} was discussed within a major theme, such as that of \textit{identity}, in which Albanian state-formation history and the recent past were reflected as indicators of current behaviour in the frame of historical determinism and fatalism.

\textit{Reconciliation} and \textit{reputation} were found to be directly linked with the concept of \textit{international community}. The understanding of the media commentators was that their agency was decisive in the Albanian democratisation. The dynamics of power in the country cannot be clearly understood if we do not include the international community into the agents involved in the context.

There is obviously more to these opinion articles than the selected themes but while this article does not pretend to be a complete expose of the contemporary political discourses in Albania, it does aim to understand them by opening a window through media into such discourses. Finally, it is worth mentioning that the accounts presented in the analysis below are inescapably an inference and a construct of the author of this article.

\textsuperscript{43} Gill, \textit{Analysing}, 179-181.
4. Analysis

The main claim of this article is that the perception of the outside world is central to the way political reality is constituted in Albania. Therefore, media accounts attribute an extended power of leverage in the way domestic politics are conducted towards the international community. There is a relatively clear pattern of pro- versus anti-government discourses, generally along the lines of pro- versus anti-government media. While pro-government discussions are compliant with international authority, there are two distinguishable patterns in the anti-governmental articles: that of compliance, but which produces an alternative representation of the Albanian reality in order to gain support for their party; and that of critique, which demands that the international community not violate the democratic rules of the game, including those related to state sovereignty.

The construction of the competing representations in the Albanian media is based on the perception of the role the international community plays in domestic politics. Therefore, it is important to investigate what the international community means for the media commentators and how they are situated in the accounts about political reality. Knowing how the media sees and interprets the position of the international community will help us understand their accounts of Albanian politics.

The international community is referred to in Albanian dailies variously as the internationals, the international factor, international community, the diplomats, the West, Westerners, EU and the US, Europe and America, our partners and international allies. In the first days after the January 21 demonstrations the international community is briefly mentioned either as an entity or body to which Albanians have to report to because of their international engagements, such as membership of NATO or the aspired membership of the EU. Both pro- and anti-government media express their concerns on how the demonstration will affect Albania’s reputation in terms of EU conditionality. In one anti-government account, the author arguing against violence states that “we are not pretending to
enter Africa, but Europe and as Europeans.” Another argues that political murders are unacceptable for a NATO member and an aspiring EU candidate: “but murdering someone in the middle of Europe, just because they expressed their anger in a demonstration, for a NATO country that aspires to be accepted in the EU, this is unacceptable.” Likewise, EU membership is considered to be threatened by the demonstrations of January 21, even for a pro-government author, who, referring to children in Albania, wrote that “last Friday their European future was once again threatened.”

The declarations of the international representatives who condemned the violence and who appealed for consensus and a return to the institutions received a lot of media attention and commentary. One of the most commented declarations was that of the American ambassador, who called Prime Minister Berisha “a real statesman” because he accepted to withdraw his intention for a counter-demonstration one week after January 21.

Pro-government media interpreted the first international declarations against violence as a sign that the international community does not consider the accusations of the opposition as founded; on the contrary, they ignore them. As one author put it, “It seems like the attempt to divide the West in its position will not be successful. It seems like the internationals do not consider the socialist leadership as an actor anymore.” To strengthen their account of the international support for the last election results, pro-government authors underline the fact that they were confirmed by the international community and their bodies, such as ODHIR, one writing that “the last elections have been certified by ODHIR’s internationals.” In one article the author extends the international support to the overall performance of the government:

44 Delia, Shqip 23.01.2011.
45 Gumeni, Shqip 27.01.2011.
46 Ylli, Panorama 23.01.2011.
47 Cako, Panorama 27.01.2011.
48 Ibid; but also in Marku, Mapo 24.01.2011.
All of us are witness to the fact that Albania under the rule of Prime Minister Sali Berisha, during the last five years has scored a large economic development, hiring thousands of people, building roads, even in those areas where before it was impossible to go even on foot, building hundreds of new schools and developing a democracy that has been supported by the international community, in particular the European Union.49

The subsequent declaration of the American ambassador was also cheered on by the pro-government writers. In one article the author analyses the declaration of the diplomat and praises it as “awesome, extra (super) exact, extra benevolent, extra professional.”50 The same author in a different article interprets the diplomatic declarations as a sign that the international community does not approve of a change in government. According to him the declaration of the American ambassador clarified some misunderstandings and speculations on the attitude of the international community towards the government. The author argues that despite the Socialist Party’s attempts, the international community does not support the removal of Berisha from power: “it was articulated more clearly than ever internationally that the violent political move of the SP to provoke the fall of the Government and Berisha’s ‘resignation’, does not have any international support.”51

In the anti-government media, we find more criticism about the international community and the relationship local politicians have with them. In an article titled “We upset Olympus”, the author compares the relationship between Albanian politicians and the international community with that of mythological Greek gods with mortals:

We have established weird relations with them, like that of a child with a parent, a pupil with the teacher, sometimes of a servant with a master. We call them to save us, to legitimise

49 Bajraktari, Panorama 23.01.2011.
50 Zheji, Mapo 25.01.2011.
51 Ibid
our word and actions, to support our authority. Any time our political communication freezes in the momentous gridlock, we ask them to play the referee, so that we can continue with the next similar conflict.52

Similarly, in an article titled “The hasty declaration of a higher diplomat” the author claims that there is no opposition to the international community, in particular from the politicians, who are continually trying to interpret the ambiguous international rhetoric so that they can adjust their behaviour accordingly:

Here in our country it has been years since nobody wants to go against the internationals, even less so against the Americans. In particular the politicians who do not want to stain their biography because they ‘endanger’ their career from the ‘American wrath’...They are conforming to the international will, trying to guess what that will is by subduing to the strong ones in global politics. The whole 20 years Albanian politicians have been stretching to read properly the messages from abroad, although they have often been ambiguous criticizing and giving the right to both parties, thus allowing both parties to cite and use those parts that were convenient in their internal war for power.53

The same author argues that the American ambassador, who had just arrived in the country, was not well-informed about domestic politics: “Mr. Arvizu has just arrived in Tirana, so obviously he has not had time to learn the history of this country, and he has not had time to learn the political history of the last twenty years”.54 The Ambassador’s appraisal of the prime minister in a press release is considered by that author as a negative influence in the political developments of the country: “Such a declaration in an aggravated time and situation like this, instead of calming will enrage more those who have chosen the path of protest to express their position against the current governance...”55

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52 Vehbiu, Mapo 31.01.2011. We can consider Vehbiu’s article published at Mapo an “outlier”. His articles are usually published in the anti-government media, in particular Shekulli.
53 Toçi, Shekulli 31.01.2011.
54 Ibid
55 Ibid
In another article, the author accuses the international community of maintaining an ‘impartial’ position, which for him means that they are not intervening to stop Berisha, because they have an interest in preserving stability in the country. However, he argues, the crisis is so deep that “[i]t is not the time for western institutions to have ‘impartial’ positions. This time the west has to be on the side of justice and truth not stability.”

Justice in this context means that they would openly take a position against Berisha’s autocratic rule.

Similarly, another author accuses the international community of distorting politics in Albania in such a way that they, as internationals, actually contribute to the crisis, writing “[i]f the Albanian people today are at a crossroad, the International Community has part of the fault.” Their behaviour is explained by the author as the result of various international actors’ economic interests which encourage them to maintain the established equilibria of influence in the country:

the Americans, Italians or the French are holding on to a regime that has thrown them a ‘bone’, for their businesses or their waste, so they, blinded by the economic concessions that Sali Berisha is making with the money and the lives of Albanians, are not being able to see Albania’s current reality: that it is deep in tyranny.

Another reason introduced for the alleged biased attitude of the West is that of a trade-off for keeping Albania “stable” in a world where multiple conflicts are underway. In the context of the uprisings of January 2011 in Tunisia, an author draws a comparison between the attitude of the International Community there and in Albania shortly before:

While supporting the events in Tunisia, so that democracy can triumph, in the case of Albania, they [the international community] are using a different standard, against the will

56  Stefani, Shqip 31.01.2011.
57  Rrozhani, Shekulli 28.01.2011.
58  Ibid
of the people, although the instigator of the crisis is the same person that was thrown away from power and put at the periphery of politics for several years.\footnote{Rrozhani Shekulli 28.01.2011. The author is referring to the fact that Berisha was president in 1997, when the country went through the civil unrest after the pyramidal schemes collapsed. After that he remained in opposition for eight years.}

Among the anti-government press, we also find authors arguing that the international community has kept its distance from Albanian politics, a position which has had negative influences in politics. One author states that

For some time now they [international community] are refraining from having an active role in the dialogue, but encourage and support it... What the internationals know, but do not accept yet, is that in Albania this option is ineffective and non-real.\footnote{Krasniqi, Gazeta Shqiptare 29.01.2011.}

Therefore he argues that there is a need for more intervention in order for the political impasse to be overcome. His claim is that unless the international community chooses not to intervene and unless local actors do not follow international guidelines, the crisis cannot be resolved. As a result of Albanian inefficiency, the only optimal long-term solution the author can propose is that it is given by the internationals and simply applied by the local actors:

the international (EU) negotiator should provide an extra solution... EU and USA rightfully think that a NATO member and a candidate country to the EU should not expect external solutions, but in the current conditions in which the country has become pawn of a politics that is extreme, exclusive and without solutions, it is responsibility of Brussels to behave outside the diplomatic practices. If Brussels does not do this today, tomorrow it is not excluded that it will be obliged to bring once again diplomatic peace missions and why not, even military ones for the protection of tranquillity and normality in Albania.\footnote{Ibid}
This author considers the crisis so deep that it might escalate to an open fire conflict that will need international humanitarian intervention. In this quote there is a cultural resonance with what happened in Albania during the civil unrest of 1997.

Very few anti-government newspaper articles address the issue of sovereignty. In one such article, though, the author comments on the behaviour of the internationals by questioning its consequences:

The ball is in the field of the internationals, who, after having violently robbed Albania’s sovereignty during the last week, in the coming week will have to prove that they did so to remove from this sovereignty only the excessive amount of poison and insanity, and return it clear from poisons, but still not castrated from our necessary critical instinct.62

In another anti-government media article, though, the author argues that in a state of crisis sovereignty becomes a secondary issue compared to the urgent need for establishing order:

The sooner this [internationally mediated negotiation between parties] will happen, the sooner the crisis will be overcome and the country will go back to normality. Any alibis against this, such as the rhetoric on sovereignty or foreign non-intervention, are minor issues in comparison with the urgent needs of Albania for a functional democracy and democratic stability.63

This interpretation of the relatively minor importance of sovereignty in comparison to order is present even in the pro-government media. One author, for example, admits that the violation of sovereignty is not good, but for him the crisis is irresolvable by itself:

The internationals have strongly returned in the Albanian political gridlock, which with the events of January 21 turned

62 Shameti, Shqip 29.01.2011.
63 Krasniqi, Gazeta Shqiptare 29.01.2011.
into a political crisis. While it is clear that this is a regress for the Albanian life and society, it is not time to weep over this. It is time, more than ever, to strongly support and trust our international friends and allies, at their competence and impartiality, in order to overcome this crisis.64

In another article, we see the author articulating international intervention as a necessity that derives not only from the current crisis, but also because he sees Albania falling into the same patterns of civil unrest regularly:

Help us Arvizu! And deeply ashamed of myself and what I represent, I ask you, Mr. Ambassador: ‘Take into your hands the ‘democratic whip’ of the State Department authority, and remove them from this spiral, and then forgive them because they know but they also don’t know what they are doing!’ So, help us Mr. Arvizu, this old country, apparently goes crazy every 15 years.65

Thus, international intervention is interpreted in two main ways. In the pro-government press the international community is the saviour of the day in a political context where the domestic political actors are incapable of compromise and consensus, but most importantly of democratic practices. They use the rhetoric of the international community to legitimise their interpretations on current events. At the same time, the anti-government press questions their role not only for their perceived partiality but also as violators of the country’s sovereignty. While for some commentators this is unacceptable, for others such external intervention is acceptable under the current impossible conditions in which the need for stability and democratisation is more important than national sovereignty. They criticise the attitude of the international community by underlining their ambiguous diplomatic statements and their unjustifiable intervention in local affairs through political and diplomatic pressure.

64 Çlli, Mapo 26.01.2011. The title of the article is also telling “The obligatory return at the internationals.”
65 Zheji Mapo, 25.01.2011.
5. Conclusion

In this article we opened a window via the print media into contemporary political discourses in Albania. An analysis of the theme of the international community’s role in domestic politics articulated in opinion articles published in five daily newspapers and discussing the demonstrations of January 21, 2001 shows that there is political polarisation reflected, even in supposedly independent media accounts. There is a pro-government and an anti-government rhetoric, which present opposing accounts and interpretation of the role the international community has played, and should have or should play in the country. These competing representations are used by the pro- and anti-government media as devices for creating conflicting assumptions and beliefs in an attempt to gain public support. There is an overall perception that the role of the international community is constitutive in constructing and validating political action in the country. However, accounts differ in their interpretation of what the international community is saying and what they expect the local elites to do.

The picture we gather from the media accounts is that events, political action and political personalities are subject to the perceived judgement of external actors, whose confirmation or support is taken as the legitimizing factor. Thus, the accepted patterns of power put the international community at the top of a hierarchy from where they control, monitor and confirm (or not) the positions of political elites. The semi-insiders operating as media commentators are subject to the influences of both the discourse of the international community and that of the local elites, so they reproduce or transform the existing patterns of behaviour.

The pro-government press claims that the government has the support of the international community. They reproduce the international discourse on the fragile but nevertheless functional democracy in Albania and interpret opposition demonstrations as an attempt to overthrow the fragile balance of the society. They appeal for compromise and consensus as a way to preserve
stability and continuity. The anti-government press’ interpretation is that international intervention is forcing stability in a context where political controversy has led to a political gridlock that cannot be resolved, unless the rules of the political game are not changed. The removal of the international community from the position of authority would finally allow for correction of current anomalies and the development of a legitimate and democratic politics, and consequently the establishment of a legitimate political system.

Media discourses cast a light on some of the themes that constitute the continual political uncertainty in Albania. They provide an interpretation of the political reality from the perspective of semi-insiders who, because of their connections to the political elites and their international training, nonetheless become their spokespeople. Consequently, although they might reflect it somehow, there is no way we can know how constitutive they are of the broader society’s perception of the political reality in the country. The persuasive rhetoric underlying the opinion articles tell us that these representations are competing for legitimacy; however, we do not know how successful they are in the sense of whether one of them dominates in the public opinion. We can guess that there might be as much controversy among the population as there is in the media accounts, an assumption we can also make based on the fact that in the last elections both parties received approximately half of the vote.

This article does not pretend to be exhaustive, because due to availability of time and space, I have done discourse analysis on a selection of 50 opinion articles published after the event in five mainstream daily newspapers and covering a time period of ten days. However, this exercise is important for paving the path for a more in-depth comprehensive and comparative study of Albanian media discourses and their role in public opinion formation. Nevertheless, considering that it was a saturated sample which was narrowed from a larger one, we can assume that it is quite representative of the mainstream media discourses in Albania. Furthermore, through discourse analysis we were able to look at the political media discourses and understand how
political controversy is articulated and how competing representations are constructed in order to gain the support of the wider public opinion.

However, the findings of this study refer only to the media accounts on the event, the role of various actors and the political process as a whole. They encourage us to think of the accounts of the other three entities with which these media representations are interconnected. Future research could focus on the analysis of the discourses of political actors themselves, such as political leaders, and an in-depth analysis of the international community reporting on Albania in order to understand their perspective on Albanian politics. Although methodologically more challenging, an attempt to analyze popular perceptions of the international community would contribute extensively to our understanding of political processes in particular contexts.

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