

To:  
Mr. Olaf Steenfadt  
Project manager MOM

Mrs Nafisa Hasanova  
project manager of MOM Albania

Mrs Kristina Voko  
executive director of BIRN Albania

Mr. Christian Mihr  
Manager of Reporter Ohne Grenzen

Reporter sans frontier

Dear all,

I am addressing this letter to you after reading your report "Monitoring Media Ownership in Albania", in which I was referred to as one of the Albanian media owners.

I appreciate your caution in defending the personal image of the Albanian media owners auto-limiting in denouncing the risk of audience concentration. The owners are in fact in the focus of repeated attacks by politics and by political media, and are often accused of very serious facts, some times only on the basis of gossip or perceptions. I believe, as I have repeatedly written in my Op-Ed, that the problems should not be hidden and that in Albania it is time to pass the media also through a filter that leads to their decriminalization of course based solely on evidence and documented facts and not through people's processes. So I appreciate the fact that your report has tried not to be copy-paste of political gossips and perceptions. A line of prudence that you have respected with everyone, but you have flagrantly violated with me.

I consider the processing of my professional file incomplete, misinformed and above purposely very unilateral. In fact, it ignores the entirety of the important facts of my 27 years of professional history in Albania (not to mention the 36 years of journalism altogether) by stopping several times on "some accusations by the opposition and former Prime Minister Sali Berisha for inclusion in government-funded projects, the best known among them to be Bunk'art" and constantly underlining the "perception" according to which I would be "close to the ruling Socialist Party and Prime Minister Edi Rama". **So, no evidence, just political gossip and perceptions.**

I'm starting with a seemingly unimportant element, but this latter, in a report that claims to be serious and professional as MOM-Albania, it raises some doubts. In fact, I have noticed a lot of differences in the Albanian version of the report from the English version, which also indicates in this aspect the tendency (and the superficial attitude) of the work done. I could quote here many examples of "incorrect translation", but I prefer to touch the real essence of the problem.

I am ascertaining that the accusations from the opposition and some political media have served to create a large part of my personal file, considering as a solid fact the "perception" of my "closeness to Socialist Party and Prime Minister Edi Rama" and the ridiculous, unimportant and old story of "Bunk'art" projekt, making insinuations about "funding cases taken from the government" illegally without submitting any evidences. Meanwhile other accusations, from the opposition or different politicians and from some media about other publishers, in much worse circumstances, are "forgotten" from your report. Here there are some examples:

- 1) At least four leading owners have been publicly accused of investing in their media money derived from drug trafficking and other criminal activities
  - 2) At least four of the leading owners are publicly accused of recycling hundreds of millions of euros illegally obtained from public funds in their media
  - 3) At least five of the leading owners are publicly accused of having benefited from public tenders, concessions and / or privatizations worth hundreds of millions of euros in exchange for supporting editorial lines.
- And so on.

The list of public accusations in reality is much longer, but it is enough for the moment. So, the question is simple: if you, as the authors of the report, have judged that the politicians and the media are not trustworthy as sources for these charges (maybe with reasons considered as biased or exaggerated) and for instance you did not include them to the files of other owners, on the basis of which elements have you judged the same politicians and the same media as credible exclusively for the charges and insinuations against me?

And don't you consider it as something harsh to accuse me (on a fake ground) *'urbi et orbi'* that I have 'benefited' from the rent of two bunkers (in Albania there are more than 178,000 others available) as "proof" of my political links with the government, without presenting any evidence and avoid to mention that I am at the same time the only owner who has a newspaper, a television and a web portal all set in a small space rented out of a private individual (so, market-priced), while nearly all other owners have placed their media in giant buildings taken from various governments at a symbolic price? Once again, why this kind of "political favor" from which others have benefited, and not me, is "forgotten" in the report?

Furthermore, why have you insisted to mention with so much details on different transfers of mine and my family's shares (totally legitimate diligence, since I do not hide anything), but you have "forgotten" to point out the strange shareholder stories of other media? For example, the story of media share transfers a few months after the mysterious murder of one of the shareholders? Or when shareholding assets are studied exclusively to avoid anti-trust law for the media? Or, again "forgetting" to denounce that one of the big televisions, quoted in the report and to whom you have not made any insinuation, has been allowed to broadcast for years and currently even without any license, in violation of any law and fair competition?

I am the only expressly mentioned publisher on the basis of your "perception" as a person close to a certain political leader, **with the obvious objective to undermine the credibility and independence that I have been trying to build on my professional job of journalist for 36 years.** How is it possible that your "perception" on my supposedly political links do not include some others publishers, one of whom is even a "ghost writer" of a well-known political exponent? While eight others openly and publicly emerge globally as supporters of some political figures? Why are these facts, which are more than some perceptions, ignored by your report? In Albania, for example, there is a widespread perception that BIRN Albania, its portal Reporter.al and some of its journalists support some political parties and are close to several important Democratic Party exponents: but would it be fairly professional to draft a public report on BIRN's credibility based solely on these "perceptions" as you did with me?

Where is the objectivity in assessments and professionalism, which should be the basic principles for a study like MOM-Albania, which has the obligation to respect the protocols and standards of the European Union?

Your so great insistence on my person would, however, appear like a sign of attention on me (contrary to the minimal audience data that - once again fake - are attributed to my media) if my short negative "biography" created by you would have fully respected my professional history. But that has not happened. I will be trying to summarize the "forgetfulness" of the report, limiting myself to cite the main public facts concerning me, facts that are well known by any person that lives and works in Albania, including of course your Albanian associates:

- 1) Between the years 1993 and 2002, I was the founder (and not just the executive) of the daily newspaper Gazeta Shqiptare, Balkanweb web portal and News24 information TV, three media rated by all independent observers as a journalism school for at least two generations and the first example of independent and Western journalism in Albania. Precisely from the fact that I do not have the tendency to be an oligarch tied to money and power, opposed of that which is described in your report, I have never been the owner of that editorial group that I have founded, choosing to remain a simple employee, paid by the Italian publisher, who remained the sole owner until the day of sale (see point 8).

- 2) As a founder and media director in Albania, I have denounced hundreds of cases of political corruption and criminal connections, training many of the best investigative journalists, successful television anchormen and directors who work today in the main Albanian media.

- 3) I was the first journalist and director who published in Albania thousands of documents about crimes committed by the communist regime.

- 4) I was the first journalist who published in Albania in 1993 the evidence of Albanian oil traffic to the Serbian Army in former Yugoslavia, which was at that time under

international embargo, a traffic led by the ruling government party, being exposed to severe reprisals not only by the Albanian government.

5) I was the first journalist who was expelled from democratic Albania (July 1995) as "persona non grata" for the independence shown by my media, an independence that was not appreciated by Sali Berisha. I was accepted to re-enter the country, provided I abandoned any leading position in the media I had founded.

6) In 1997 one of my journalists was killed in Tirana for political reasons.

7) I was the first director to publish in the Gazeta Shqiptare the existence of cannabis cultivation in Lazarat since 2005, drawing on me the anger and threats of government.

8) I was the first director to publish journalistic investigations in Albania denouncing political ties after the Gërdeci tragedy and broadcasting investigative programs affecting the mightily powers of any political color.

9) In 2009, the media I founded and which I headed in Albania was the first to conduct a courageous investigation about the negotiations on maritime borders between the Albanian government and Greece, discovering a scandal of international level that is still being discussed today.

10) In the evening of January 21, 2011 the television I created and directed (News24) was the first and the only one to broadcast the footage that testified the responsibility of the Republican Guard in the killing of four peaceful demonstrators in Tirana, which until that very moment were qualified by the government 'Berisha' and all other media as victims of the opposition itself. If I had not transmitted those footages, maybe Albania's political history would have taken another course. Three months later (four weeks before the administrative elections) I was forced to keep silent after the entire publishing group I had founded was bought without my knowledge (with a record amount of 6 million euros) by a publisher officially close to Lulzim Basha and the Democratic Party. It is worth mentioning that he was one of those publishers, to whom you dedicate a five-line curriculum, filled with neutral information and "forgetting" this element.

11) In Italy, between the years 1979 (when I started working as a journalist) and 1990, I was in the first line of the war against the mafia, receiving several death threats from Sacra Corona Unita's exponents, whose existence I have denounced for the first time publicly, becoming for a long time one of its leading Italian experts. I got a price among others from the Italian National Journalists' Union (FNSI) for my commitment to press freedom. In 1988 I published a book-investigation about the murder of Italian politician Renata Fonte, revealing the existence of a political instigator. I have done various journalistic investigations on crime and mafia for RAI (Italian Radio television).

12) From the year 1991 to 2008 I have served many times as a war correspondent in Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia, Somalia, Iraq, Kuwait, Kosovo, Macedonia, Lebanon, Israel and later as head of ANSA's correspondent office in the Middle East.

13) Regardless of my critical position to the Democratic Party of Sali Berisha, in 2009 I received from the President of the Republic, Mr. Bamir Topi (DP) the Medal of Gratitude for the contribution made to the development of free and modern information in Albania.

14) The media I have created in Albania have been quoted many times in international reports dedicated to persecutions of various types from the government, including illegal trials, fines and unlawful penalties.

15) From the year 2008 to 2012 I was Editor-in-Chief of the Gazzetta del Mezzogiorno, the most important daily of South Italy, where I have performed my professional role by directing 150 professional Italian journalists with seriousness, commitment, sacrifice and full integrity function of a free and independent press, as required in an European Union's country.

16) My wife returned to Albania in 2011 and I joined her in 2012 (at the highest point of Sali Berisha's power), investing all of our personal savings into creating a new publishing group, this time not for the account of another publisher: in fact, I considered that being the owner, would be the only true guarantee that no power would force me to be silent, as happened a few months before that with the purchase of Gazeta Shqiptare, Balkanweb and News24.

17) Since 2011 and so far, Shqiptarja.com and Report TV have been at the forefront of denunciations and investigations on countless scandals in public administration, gun traffic, corruption cases, and finally abuses in the justice field, publishing, like no other media, all the incomes of politicians, judges and prosecutors. Politicians and judges have tried to silence us with different kinds of threats and pressures (in one of the proceedings against us by judge Gjin Gjoni we are indicted along with some BIRN journalists who have prepared this report with you, but who have "forgotten" to quote in my file this very recent case too). The judicial process against us is also monitored by OSCE and US embassy experts.

I could continue this way, since 36 years of journalism around the world, in search of the truth and not the money, can not be summed up in only 17 points. But, as you can see, my professional history is much richer than the ridiculous political charges of Bunk'art's lease, which, against any logic, has been treated exclusively in your report. I have no problem with you mentioning your "accusations" and "perceptions", but if you have decided to do the scanner, you must be correct and show my full story and not entitled to trivialize it, presenting me as one of the many pushy and small publishers who strive to get rich through political friendships and abuses, dreaming of becoming a media oligarch.

You should have also indicated that both bunkers (Bunk'Art project) were leased through a public competition monitored by the Supreme State Audit, a regular and transparent procedure that is easily verifiable, to which no other non-governmental organization has shown any interest and did not participate in the competition. "Qendra URA" is an NGO just as you at RSF or like BIRN, that from government institutions you even receive funds, but not for this reason anyone is authorized, as you did to me, to affirm without any evidence that you are a political supporter of the governments that finance your projects.

In my professional life I never avoided to have political views, but I always refused to put them in the service of anyone in power. That alone made me end up in the blacklist of many politicians, including Mr. Sali Berisha, to which your report now serves as an international megaphone (the report MOM-Albania, with his own "charges", is also on the web in English and the slander against me may seem as if they are certified by your seeming independence). For a journalist, to be critical of a way of conceptualizing governance, freedom and democracy, as I often was to Mr. Berisha and many other politicians, does not authorize anyone to put him in the opposite political camp, as does MOM -Albania. I find this something dishonest and incorrect, since in the drafting of the report, where it seems that I was destined to be mentioned, no one of your associates contacted me.

I remain an independent and free journalist, even when I criticize someone or when I defend him, as this is the fundamental principle of European journalism with which I have grown up.

In your report, I asses another point to be very abusive, which is not just personal: a decisive source of your investigation about the concentration of televisions, newspapers and radios audiences was the data distributed by Abacus Research. The company Abacus Research has been at the center of [a long investigation published on Shqiptarja.com](#), documenting (and there has been no denial ever) that the audience reports that this company has published since 2011 are completely fabricated and biased, as the company has no employees, it has a capital of only 800 euros and zero investment, so that it does not own a single computer for instance it has no technological capacity ora human resources to carry out the measurements of radio-television audience and no known possibility to calculate the reading rate of newspapers. It should have been your obligation to inform the public about this investigation, published many months before the MOM-Albania report came out, making it aware that you must be careful about the reliability of Abacus's data, even though it would jeopardize to question the main conclusions of your work: but this is the price of the truth, which you also need keep in mind.

Every day I struggle to withstand, with the few financial means I have, a competition that has become unfair from the unlimited funds it receives, funds which your report does not analyze even for a moment. I fight to guarantee, through my sacrifice and professionalism, an information as free and honest as possible, to be able to afford, then, at the end of the month, to pay punctually the salaries of my Albanian colleagues.

You have the obligation to publish an independent and objective report, as your resources come from public donors (in the case of this report, by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Development and Cooperation) who finance you precisely because they are looking for objectivity in exchange. I try to achieve a journalism as independent and objective as possible, but with relying on my savings: of course, this is much more difficult, but in this sense I am a "Journalist without Borders" also. I hoped that at least you would have acknowledged that.

Unfortunately, you have fallen into the same provincialism, filled with inexplicable envy and spite, which condition the work of who lives in Albania, where some journalists pampered by foreigners' euros pretend to fight the oligarchs, waiting to become one of them. Or simply crushed by the awareness that they could never be so. I'm not such a person, because if I wanted to, I could have been, but I voluntarily and freely choose another path.

The suspicions you imply against me, I consider being a deliberate slander, which is even more flagrant by the equally flagrant factual **omission and the subjective selection of the used information** that I have above mentioned in a summarized way. From the highlights or concealments that emerge from the MOM-Albania report and which are affecting or favoring almost all publishing groups under analysis, I think that the entire structure of your inquiry is under question, because **such a subjective, inaccurate and unilateral use of the data available, irrevocably conditions the credibility and independence of the frame that you have created**. But this should be firstly a concern for you, before it's even for me.

As far as I am concerned, **I request that the text of this letter be attached integrally through the hyperlinks to your MOM-Albania report (in Albanian and in English) in all parts related to me or with my wife Alba Maltezi, so that, together with your version, readers can also have my version of the facts.**

Carlo Bollino

Tirana, 23th march 2018