

PUBLIC STATEMENT- IN DEFENCE OF CIVIC SPACE, FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND DEMOCRATIC DEBATE

Addressed to:

- The Parliament of the Republic of Albania;
- The European Commissioner for Enlargement, Ms Marta Kos;
- The Ambassador of the European Union to Albania, Mr Silvio Gonzato;
- The Head of the OSCE Presence in Albania, Ambassador Michel Tarran;
- The Head of the Council of Europe Office in Tirana, Ms Giulia Re;
- The People's Advocate of the Republic of Albania;
- The Audiovisual Media Authority;
- The Commissioner for Protection from Discrimination;
- The Commissioner for the Right to Information and Protection of Personal Data;
- as well as diplomatic missions and international partners.

We, the civil society organisations, independent media outlets and human rights defenders signing this statement, express our concern over the recurrence of smear campaigns and public attacks against journalists, activists, civil society organisations and citizens exercising their right to speak out, protest or take part in public debate.

These are not isolated incidents or disagreements between individuals. They reflect an increasingly common pattern of communication intended to shift debate away from matters of public interest and towards attacks on the individuals who raise them.

Instead of debating arguments, people are targeted; instead of discussing facts, motives are called into question; instead of transparency and accountability, insinuations, labels and narratives are used to discredit professional work and civic engagement. These practices affect more than the individuals involved; they create a climate of pressure that discourages participation in public life and narrows civic space.

In recent weeks, these attacks have targeted organisations, journalists, activists, environmental defenders and various citizens. Although the targets differ, the pattern remains the same: personal attacks, labels and denigrating narratives are used to evade debate on the issues raised and to exert pressure on anyone who chooses to participate in public life.

This pattern becomes even more troubling when amplified by individuals holding public office. In a democratic society, public officials have not only the right but also the responsibility to participate in public debate while upholding the highest standards of institutional communication. Using public authority to single out activists, journalists or citizens by name and expose them to smear campaigns is incompatible with the democratic standards Albania has committed to uphold.

Respect for the rule of law, media freedom, freedom of expression and freedom of peaceful assembly, together with the guarantee of an enabling environment for civil society, are fundamental elements of a functioning democracy and part of the standards accompanying Albania's accession process to the European Union.

Civil society organisations, independent journalism and civic activism are not adversaries of institutions. On the contrary, they help strengthen transparency, accountability and public trust, playing an indispensable role in the functioning of a democratic society.

Cooperation between Albanian civil society and international partners is a legitimate part of the country's democratic development. Attempts to instrumentalise this cooperation in order to delegitimise civil society organisations or their partners run counter to the principles of pluralism, democratic dialogue and international cooperation that also underpin Albania's European integration process.

In the face of these developments, we remain determined not to allow smear campaigns or attempts at intimidation to restrict the exercise of our civic freedoms and responsibilities, and we call on:

- State institutions to ensure in practice the protection of freedom of expression, media freedom, the right to peaceful assembly, and a safe environment for civil society organisations and citizens who engage publicly.
- Public officials and political actors, to conduct public debate based on facts and arguments, avoiding denigrating language, personal attacks and any form of communication that could foster the stigmatisation or intimidation of individuals.
- The media, to uphold professional standards and the Code of Ethics, and to verify information before publication.
- International partners, the institutions of the European Union, the Council of Europe, the OSCE and diplomatic missions to continue closely monitoring developments concerning civic space, media freedom and fundamental freedoms in Albania, as part of their assessment of democratic standards and of the commitments undertaken by the country within the European integration process.

Protecting civic space is not solely in the interest of civil society organisations; it is a prerequisite for the functioning of a democratic state, the strengthening of public trust, and respect for the European standards Albania has chosen to follow.

Signatories:

1. Albanian Media Council
2. Association of Journalists of Albania
3. Erasmus Network Tirana
4. Amfora Center
5. Alliance Against LGBTI Discrimination
6. Civil Rights Defenders, Albania
7. Partners Albania
8. Albanian Helsinki Committee
9. Civic Resistance
10. AWEN – Albanian Women's Empowerment Network
11. "Faktoje"
12. "BIRN" Albania
13. Shteg.org

14. Academy of Political Studies
15. "Together" Foundation
16. Science and Innovation for Development Center (SCiDEV)
17. Albanian Center for Economic Research (ACER)
- 18. Institute for Political Studies (ISP)**
19. Gender Alliance for Development Center
20. CRCA Albania
21. The Association "Unë, Gruaja" – Pogradec
22. Women's Forum – Elbasan
23. The Association "Gender, Paqe e Siguri" – Durrës
24. *Rrjeti i Informimit dhe Qytetarisë Aktive*
25. *Citizens Channel*
26. All Green Centre
27. Albanian Center for Quality Journalism
28. "Balkan Investigative Reporting Network", Albania
29. Together for Life
30. Center "Res Publica"