

Terms of Reference (ToR) for the Evaluation of BIRN Albania Strategy 2021-2025

Position:	International expert/s for the Evaluation of BIRN Albania Strategy 2021-2025.
Location:	Remote, with at least one field trip to Tirana.
Evaluation budget:	Maximum EUR 6.000, including taxes. Travel and accommodation costs will be covered by BIRN Albania.
Working days:	Maximum 20 days (cumulative working days for the expert / team of experts)
End-Users of the Evaluation:	BIRN Albania staff and Board / the Embassy of Sweden in Tirana.
Deadline for applications:	April 30th, 2025

1. Introduction

BIRN Albania wishes to engage the services of an evaluation expert / team in order to review and evaluate the implementation of the Strategic Plan 2021-2025. The assignment covers aspects of relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability and impact and how Sida aid modality to BIRN Albania may have affected these aspects. The evaluation will be used primarily as an input to BIRN Albania for upcoming preparation a new Strategic Plan and also as an input to discussions and assessment of Sida support beyond 2025.

BIRN Albania has enjoyed Sida support, represented by the Embassy of Sweden in Tirana, for a number of years, by making significant progress, toward the fulfilment of its stated goal, while holding on to its core values during its interventions for the implementation of our strategy and core programme for the period 2021-2025. The overall objectives of the Core Activities are to promote people's increased access to accurate information, increase their influence on the democratic process, and increase their opportunities to claim their rights. BIRN Albania has also sought support to enhance its capacity to address emerging challenges and transform them into opportunities.

BIRN Albania is an investigative media organisation registered in Tirana court with the status of a centre in 2015. BIRN provides independent information through its mediums (primarily: www.reporter.al) and also through the re-publication of its stories in other media outlets. BIRN Albania work focuses on transparency, openness, accountability and access to information. These are values that BIRN Albania shares with the other members of the BIRN network.

The main objective of BIRN Albania work is "Albanian society uphold democratic values allowing citizens equal opportunities to make informed choices and hold the government accountable". Through high

quality investigative reporting and creating a pool of skilled journalists, BIRN Albania examines and scrutinises key processes, steers debates and provides the public with impartial and reliable information. BIRN Albania works to strengthen its role in monitoring and advocating for the transparency and accountability of public institutions through enabling CSOs and citizens to influence decision-makers.

BIRN believes that providing people with information and raising their awareness on issues of public interest increases citizens' understanding, helps them make informed decisions and gives them the tools to demand changes and effectively advocate for their priorities. That is why BIRN Albania invests in fostering an accurate and unbiased information flow, by providing free content for local media and raising the capacities of their journalists to help fulfil the watchdog role that the media should have.

2. Evaluation object: intervention to be evaluated

The evaluation object is BIRN Albania's Strategy for the period 2021-2025, which aims to promote people's increased access to accurate information, increase their influence on the democratic process, and increase their opportunities to claim their rights. The core programme of BIRN Albania for the period 2021-2025 is largely based on the challenges that the Albanian society is facing, assumptions and needs of our beneficiaries and stakeholders, changes and results that we want to achieve, the internal capacities and previous successful working modalities of the organization, as well as lessons learned during the implementation of our last programme.

Key issues that BIRN Albania has identified and has tried to address through its programme include loss of media independence and lack of resources and capacities of journalists for investigative and specialized reporting; poor oversight and accountability of public institutions' anti-corruption and anti-organized crime efforts; lack of cooperation between CSOs and journalists to address issues of public interest and threats to human rights.

The results framework of our core programme is based on the BIRN Albania strategy for the respective period, led by its overall objective 'The Albanian society upholds democratic values and freedoms allowing citizens equal opportunities to make informed choices and hold government accountable'.

The desired changes that BIRN Albania has aimed to achieve through its core programme during the period 2021 – 2025 are summarized below through the specific objectives:

1. People have increased access to accurate information
2. People have increased influence on democratic process
3. People have increased opportunities to claim their rights
4. Internal capacities of the organization strengthened

Our partners

Donors - We have built strong relation with a number of donors in Albania and abroad. Our donors: European Commission, Foreign Commonwealth & Development Office - British Embassy, National Endowment for Democracy, Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), etc.

Media - BIRN has developed cooperation with hundreds of local and international media, which trust BIRN as a source. Numerous articles are republished in many local media and carried by news agencies. Media outlets are also open for BIRN's training programmes, which invite journalists to participate in them.

Civil sector – BIRN Albania is building networks with CSOs through different projects, in order to strengthen their capacities for advocacy and provide platforms for their messages, or to jointly act on important issues. We also mobilise their support to monitor and scrutinize duty-bearers in order to create synergy and joint action.

Our stakeholders

General public – We empower people by providing them with accurate information, giving them a voice and mobilising them to participate in the decision-making processes.

Media – We support an accurate, unbiased and independent flow of information by providing media outlets with high quality content, as well as raising their own capacities to produce quality content by training journalists.

Journalists - We raise the capacities of journalists by improving their investigative, analytical, court and election reporting skills, as well as provide financial support to local journalist to produce quality and independent journalism.

Decision makers – We influence decision-makers by exposing issues, which obliges them to make changes and we thus increase accountability and responsiveness towards the public.

Civil Society Organisations – We strengthen their capacities, give them a platform to increase visibility and galvanise their efforts in the fields of good governance and the fight against corruption, media freedom, human rights and the rule of law.

For further context and to assist in the evaluation process, the selected evaluator will be provided with relevant documents, including BIRN Albania's Strategy 2021-2025, a summary of which is attached to this TORs as **Annex I**.

In addition to the Strategy document, which contains the Results Framework Tree and the Monitoring Framework, the evaluator/s will be provided with annual plans of activities, respective reports and monitoring and evaluation datasets, as well as the mid-term self-assessment of the Strategy. These documents will serve as key resources to guide the evaluation and ensure a comprehensive understanding of the strategy's objectives and monitoring mechanisms.

3. Evaluation purpose: intended use

The purpose of this external evaluation is to assess the progress and impact of BIRN Albania's Strategy for the period 2021-2025, identify lessons learned, and provide recommendations for improving its future strategic direction and activities. The evaluation will focus on the extent to which the strategy's objectives have been achieved, prioritizing relevance, effectiveness and efficiency aspects, and the sustainability of the results.

The evaluation will be used to inform decisions on how the implementation of the strategy can be adjusted and improved in the upcoming years. Additionally, the findings will provide valuable insights to guide the preparation of future phases of BIRN Albania's work and contribute to the strategic direction of the organization beyond 2025. **The primary intended users of the evaluation are BIRN Albania and the Embassy of Sweden in Tirana.**

4. Evaluation purpose: timing

The evaluation is being carried out at this point in time because BIRN Albania is approaching the conclusion of its current Strategy 2021-2025. This provides a key opportunity to assess the successes, challenges, and lessons learned throughout the implementation period. By evaluating the outcomes, results, and effectiveness of the strategy, BIRN Albania will be able to gather valuable insights that will inform the planning and development of the next strategic phase.

5. Evaluation scope

The evaluation scope is limited to assessing the implementation and impact of BIRN Albania's Strategy 2021-2025, with a focus on the following aspects:

- **Time Frame:** The evaluation will cover the period from the start of the strategy's implementation in 2021 through the current year (2025), capturing both the progress made so far and any challenges encountered.
- **Geographical Area:** The evaluation will focus on BIRN Albania's activities within Albania. This includes all regions where BIRN Albania's interventions have been carried out, both urban and rural, and will consider the geographical spread of its investigative journalism, advocacy, and capacity-building activities.
- **Target Groups:** The evaluation will primarily assess the impact on journalists, civil society organizations (CSOs), and local media outlets that have directly benefited from BIRN Albania's activities, such as capacity-building activities, collaborative journalism, and training programs.
- **Specific Aspects of the Intervention:** During the Inception Phase of the evaluation, the evaluators will specify the scope of the evaluation based on the strategy's detailed objectives and indicators. This will ensure that the evaluation remains aligned with the key strategic priorities and goals outlined in the 2021-2025 strategy document.

6. Evaluation questions

The evaluation will be guided by the following key questions:

Question 1, Relevance: To what extent has BIRN Albania's strategy remained relevant to the needs of its target groups (journalists, CSOs, local media, and the general public) and to the broader democratic context in Albania? To what extent core support modality is relevant to the context in which BIRN Albania operates?

Question 2, Effectiveness: How effective has BIRN Albania been in achieving the intended outcomes and results as outlined in the 2021-2025 Strategy, particularly in terms of promoting transparency, accountability, and citizens' access to information?

Question 3, Efficiency: How efficiently has BIRN Albania utilized its resources (human, financial, and time) in implementing the activities of the strategy? Have the outcomes achieved been in proportion to the resources invested? Is there any implication of the modality of Sida support in the efficiency of BIRN Albania operations?

Question 4, Impact: What has been the broader impact of BIRN Albania's investigative journalism, advocacy, and capacity-building efforts on transparency and accountability in Albanian public institutions?

Question 5, Sustainability: To what extent are the results achieved by BIRN Albania's strategy likely to be sustained beyond the current strategy period? Are the mechanisms in place to ensure continued impact, particularly in strengthening the role of local media, CSOs, and journalists?

Questions are expected to be further developed by the tenderer and further refined during the inception phase of the evaluation.

7. Evaluation quality

The evaluation shall be utilisation-focused which means that the evaluators must facilitate the entire evaluation process with careful consideration of how all aspects of the evaluation will affect the use of the evaluation. Therefore, the evaluation must be planned and conducted in ways to enhance the utilisation of both the findings and of the process itself, to inform decisions and improve performance. This approach entails close interaction between the evaluators and the primary users in the evaluation assignment. The interaction must last throughout the entire evaluation process. An important component of this participatory approach is to enable joint knowledge creation between evaluators and the users of the evaluation. The evaluation process shall be adapted to major context changes if needed, so that the evaluation always continues to serve the overall purpose/intended use.

Whenever relevant the evaluation shall take development perspectives into account, when they design and implement the evaluation.¹

The evaluators must consider if any part of their work can harm any group, especially groups that face discrimination. If so, they need to mitigate these risks. In cases where sensitive or confidential issues are to be addressed in the evaluation, evaluators have to ensure an evaluation design and process that do not put informants and stakeholders at risk in any step of the evaluation process.

When it comes to **evaluation methodology**, the evaluation shall:

- be reliable
- be transparent

Reliable means that the ambition at the outset is that the evaluators will handle all relevant methodological challenges so that each conclusion can be trusted beyond reasonable doubt and can hold up against external scrutiny. A lower level of reliability for specific questions is only acceptable if it is due to reasons that was not foreseeable at the outset or if it was agreed at start of the evaluation.

Transparent means that it shall be clear to the users of the evaluation how reliable each conclusion is. Hence, when a conclusion is stated it shall be clear if it is speculative or whether there are some other specific methodological considerations that affect the reliability.

Furthermore, it shall be possible for the users to understand how the evaluators handle relevant methodological challenges for each conclusion. The methodological challenges includes (to the extent relevant):

- How data was collected and processed. This includes sampling methods, interview techniques and cleaning protocol, as required by the chosen evaluation design.
- How source criticism was applied. This includes assessing the potential biases of the sources, and assessing how the sources know what they claim. When a source is triangulated it includes an assessment of whether the triangulated sources are independent from each other and/or have opposing biases.
- How the evaluators arrived at descriptive conclusions. This includes the operationalization of concepts, e.g. a description of how concepts are defined in terms of observables.
- How the evaluators inferred causality. This means describing how the evaluators move from observations (e.g. observing that the cause happened and that the effect happened), to inferring that there is a causal link between cause and effect. A respondent claiming that there was an causal effect is not, in itself, sufficient evidence, unless there has to be some reason to believe that the respondent were able to infer causality.

¹ The five development perspectives are: poor people's perspective, gender, human rights, conflict sensitivity and the impact on the environment and climate. Please note that what we are speaking of here is how the evaluation is implemented. Any of the perspectives could also be examined by one or several of the evaluation questions.

- How generalisation beyond the collected data is made (e.g. through representative sampling or some theory based argument). If the generalisation is based on an informal assessment, then this should be made clear to the users.

In addition to the criteria outlined above, the evaluation shall conform to OECD/DAC (2010) "Quality Standards for Development Evaluation" and OECD/DAC (2014) "Glossary of Key Terms in Evaluation", as well as the OECD/DAC (2021) "Applying Evaluation Criteria Thoughtfully".

8. The expected deliverables

After the selection and contracting procedure is finalized, the evaluators shall, during the course of the evaluation, produce a number of deliverables. These are outlined below.

8.1 The inception report

The inception report will form the basis for the continued evaluation process and shall be approved by BIRN Albania before the evaluation team proceeds with the implementation. The inception report should be written in English. There is no specific page limit for the Inception Report.

The evaluators are expected to provide a comprehensive and well-structured report that covers the necessary aspects of the evaluation framework and methodology, including:

- the proposed structure for the final report;
- how to apply Sida's development perspectives to the evaluation process
- how to make sure no one is harmed by the evaluation
- the stakeholders' roles in the evaluation process
- a clear process description of stakeholder participation
- a detailed time and work plan, including number of working days for the remaining of the evaluation and space for reflection and learning between the intended users of the evaluation

During the inception phase, the evaluator and the users shall agree on who will be responsible for keeping the various stakeholders informed about the evaluation and how to ensure their participation.

All limitations to the evaluation design and methods shall be made explicit, in addition to any remaining underlying assumptions. The consequences of these limitations and assumptions for the evaluation outputs should be discussed. This information should usually be presented in the form of an evaluation matrix.

The inception report should include a reassessment of the **evaluability**² of the evaluation questions. The reassessment can lead to that organisation agrees to adjust the evaluation questions or the scope of the evaluation, but only under the following conditions:

- the reassessment of the evaluability is based on information that was not known when the evaluators accepted the proposal and which could not have been foreseen by the evaluators when they wrote the proposal, and
- the reassessment is based on things that are verifiable (at least in principle) by the organisation

8.2 Deliverables during the data collection and analysis phase

During the data collection and analysis phase, the evaluators will implement the data collection and analysis plan developed during the inception phase, by submitting the final list of stakeholders to be interviewed and respective timeline.

8.3 The final report

The final report is recommended to be no more than 35 pages in length. However, the number of pages should correspond to the complexity of the evaluation, excluding annexes. It shall be written in English. The report should be written in a plain, clear and unambiguous language. It should be easily understood by the primary users of the evaluation, as defined in these ToR, and the form of the report should be appropriate given the purpose(s) of the evaluation. It should have a clear structure and the report should be professionally proof-red.

The executive summary of the final report is recommended to be a maximum of 4 to 8 pages. In the executive summary the key findings should be presented as early as possible in the text. It should be clear to the reader how reliable each conclusion is, especially if a conclusion is based on less reliable evidence.

The executive summary should easily be understood by all intended audience(s), including both primary and secondary users. Hence, in terms of the accessibility of the language, the requirements are higher for the executive summary than for the rest of the report.

The main body of the report shall present the findings, conclusions, recommendations and lessons learned separately and with a clear distinction between them. Recommendations should flow logically from conclusions and be specific and directed to relevant intended users. It should be clear which recommendations are most important / priority to address.

Evaluation findings shall flow logically from the data, showing a clear line of evidence to support the conclusions. Conclusions should be substantiated by findings and analysis, meaning each finding should be presented in a way that clarifies what evidence it is based on and how reliable that evidence is. Hence,

² Evaluability is defined as “the extent to which an activity or a program can be evaluated in a reliable and credible fashion.”

the reader should be able to understand how the evaluators handled all the methodological problems outlined in section 8 above, to the extent relevant (i.e. data collection and processing, source criticism, descriptive conclusions, causal inference and generalisations).

The **final report annexes** shall always include:

- the ToR
- the stakeholder analysis
- the evaluation matrix (or equivalent presentation).

The inception report does not have to be included in its entirety in the final report annexes. However, major diversions from the assignment as outlined in these ToR, should be described in the final report annexes. The annexes shall describe:

- the purpose of the evaluation, specifically who is supposed to use the evaluation and for what
- how the utilisation-focused approach has been implemented during the evaluation, including how the intended users participated in and contributed to the process and how process use was facilitated, i.e. how the evaluators created space for reflection
- how the evaluators applied Sida's development perspectives to the evaluation process, and how they made sure no one was harmed by the evaluation

The final report annexes can also include evaluation management issues e.g. who was consulted when and key meetings that were held. Lists of key informants/interviewees shall only include personally identifiable data if this is deemed safe and relevant (i.e. when it is contributing to the credibility of the evaluation) based on a case based assessment by the evaluator and the commissioning unit/embassy. The inclusion of personally identifiable data in the report must always be supported by written or otherwise recorded consent.

9. Time schedule

The table below lists key deliverables for the evaluation process. Alternative deadlines for deliverables may be suggested by the consultant and negotiated during the inception phase.

Deliverables	Participants	Deadlines
1. Start-up online meetings and sharing of all relevant documents	1) Evaluator/s – Expert/s 2) BIRN Albania Executive Director 3) BIRN Albania Project Manager	05 – 09 May, 2025
2. Inception phase	Evaluators	09 - 19 May, 2025

3. Draft inception report	Evaluators	Tentative 20 May 2025
4. Inception meeting (comments to be sent before the meeting)	Primary users	21 – 24 May, 2025
5. Revise inception report	Evaluators	Tentative 30 May 2025
6. Data collection & analysis phase (interviews / focus groups, both online and in- the field)	Evaluators	01 – 20 June 2025
7. Submission of draft evaluation report	Evaluators	Tentative 30 June 2025
8. Primary users read and comment draft report	Primary users	Tentative 07 July 2025
9. Final evaluation report	Evaluators	Tentative 15 July 2025

10. Organisation of evaluation management

This evaluation is commissioned by BIRN Albania. The primary intended users are BIRN Albania and Embassy of Sweden in Tirana.

The Embassy of Sweden has contributed to the ToR and will be provided an opportunity to comment on the inception report as well as the final report but will not be involved in the management of the evaluation. Hence the commissioner will evaluate tenders, approve the inception report and the final report of the evaluation. The start-up meeting and the debriefing/validation workshop will be held with the commissioner only.

11. Consultant Qualifications

General qualifications

The experts involved should fulfil the following criteria:

- Good knowledge of the media and political context in Albania and / or Balkans;
- At least 5 years of working experience;
- Very good skills in writing and speaking English;
- Knowledge of Albanian would be an asset;
- Be able to communicate clearly and effectively;
- Strong time-management and organizational skills;
- To be able to ensure confidentiality of project information.

Specific qualifications

The experts involved should fulfil the following criteria:

- Proven experience in evaluating similar interventions on media programmes and investigative non for-profit media organisations;
- Good understanding of political and media context, freedom of expression, journalist's safety, etc in Albania and Balkan region;
- Knowledge of development perspectives and OECD/DAC standards;
- Previous experience in conducting evaluations of different aid modalities to CSOs will be an asset.

The evaluators must be independent from the evaluation object and evaluated activities and have no stake in the outcome of the evaluation.

12. Financial and Human Resources

The maximum budget amount available for the evaluation is 6,000 Euro.

Invoicing and payment shall be managed according to the following:

- Approval of the Inception Report: 30% of the amount; and
- Approval of the final report: 70% of the amount

Additional travel and accommodation costs will be agreed with BIRN Albania during the Inception phase and covered by the contracting party.

The contact person at BIRN Albania is the executive director. The contact person should be consulted if any problems arise during the evaluation process.

Relevant Sida/ BIRN documentation will be provided by the responsible Programme Officer at the Swedish Embassy and BIRN Albania will provide additional documentation. Embassy and BIRN will provide suggestions for the stakeholders to be interviewed and provide contact information.

13. Application Process

The expert / team of experts is expected to submit a proposal, including:

- *Letter of Interest*, summarizing previous relevant experiences with this call;
- *Technical proposal*, including a summary of steps / approaches to be implemented for the successful fulfilment of the assignment and division of work between experts (max. 2 pages);
- *Financial offer* for this assignment in Euro.
- CV of the expert/s;
- *The contacts of two possible references.*

If the application will be submitted by a team of experts, please note that the tenderers must propose a team leader that takes part in the evaluation by at least 30% of the total evaluation team time including core team members, specialists and all support functions. It is important that the competencies of the individual team members are complimentary.

The deadline for submission of applications is **April 30th, 2025**.

All applications should be sent by email to the following address: office.albania@birn.eu.com, indicating the title of the TORs in the Subject.

Annex I:

Balkan Investigative Reporting Network in Albania

Summary of Strategy 2021-2025

About BIRN Albania

BIRN Albania is a non-profit media development and investigative journalism organization established in 2009. It works to expose corruption, strengthen democracy, and promote freedom of expression in Albania. Through investigative reporting, media capacity building, and advocacy, BIRN Albania plays a crucial role in holding institutions accountable and empowering citizens with accurate information.

Vision, Mission, and Core Values

Vision: Albanian society upholds democratic values and freedoms, allowing citizens equal opportunities to make informed choices and hold institutions accountable.

Mission: Strengthen democracy and freedom of speech by enhancing journalistic capacities, increasing public awareness of rights, promoting transparency and accountability, and fostering debate on political, economic, social, and cultural issues.

Core Values:

- Transparency & Accountability – Upholding honesty in reporting and institutional responsibility.
- Independence – Maintaining impartiality and resisting political or commercial influence.
- Justice & Equality – Advocating for human rights and ensuring equal access to information and opportunities.

Theory of Change

BIRN Albania's Theory of Change is rooted in the belief that access to accurate and independent information enhances public participation and fosters accountability in governance. The approach involves three interlinked stages:

1. Information & Awareness – Through investigative journalism and specialized reporting, BIRN Albania ensures that accurate, timely, and relevant information is accessible to the public. This reduces misinformation, encourages transparency, and enhances media literacy.
2. Engagement & Empowerment – By collaborating with civil society organizations (CSOs), activists, and independent media, BIRN Albania fosters an informed and active citizenry. Strengthening journalists' skills and providing them with resources enables them to investigate and report critical public interest issues.
3. Accountability & Reform – Public scrutiny, investigative reporting, and advocacy efforts lead to increased transparency, institutional responsiveness, and policy reforms. Holding authorities accountable and exposing corruption contributes to a stronger democratic society where rule of law is upheld.

Strategic Objectives and Key Interventions

BIRN Albania's 2021-2025 strategy is structured around four key objectives:

1. Increasing Access to Accurate Information

- Investigative Journalism: Providing in-depth reporting on corruption, organized crime, and justice reform through its platform Reporter.al.
- Journalist Capacity Building: Training journalists in investigative techniques, data journalism, and court reporting.
- Digital Storytelling: Expanding the use of multimedia formats, video content, and infographics to reach broader audiences.

2. Enhancing Public Influence on the Democratic Process

- Government Transparency: Monitoring public institutions' accountability through Freedom of Information (FOI) requests and public databases.
- Judicial Reform Monitoring: Reporting on the progress of judicial reforms and the vetting process of judges and prosecutors.
- Fight Against Organized Crime: Investigating money laundering and criminal networks while promoting policy dialogue on these issues.

3. Strengthening Citizen Engagement and Advocacy

- CSO & Journalist Collaboration: Organizing workshops to facilitate partnerships between journalists and civil society organizations (CSOs) in exposing corruption and human rights abuses.
- Amplifying Marginalized Voices: Producing stories highlighting the challenges faced by vulnerable groups, including women, minorities, and activists.
- Advocacy for Media Freedom: Monitoring and reporting on threats to journalists and advocating for press freedom and internet governance.

4. Strengthening Internal Capacities and Sustainability

- Institutional Development: Improving internal governance, privacy policies, gender equality frameworks, and environmental impact assessments.
- Cybersecurity Measures: Enhancing digital infrastructure and security to protect against cyber threats.
- Knowledge Sharing & Partnerships: Facilitating exchanges with international media organizations to enhance expertise and collaboration.

Gender Mainstreaming & Environmental Impact

Gender Mainstreaming

BIRN Albania recognizes gender equality as a fundamental human right and a key driver of democratic development. The organization actively works to combat gender discrimination and violence, especially in times of crisis. Through reporting grants and investigative coverage, BIRN highlights gender-related issues and advocates for equal opportunities. At the operational level, BIRN is committed to gender-balanced staffing, leadership, and expert engagement, alongside the development of a gender action plan incorporating disaggregated data collection.

Environmental Impact

Environmental degradation in Albania often intersects with human rights violations. BIRN Albania has consistently reported on environmental crimes, resource exploitation, and grassroots activism. It has also produced award-winning investigative documentaries on hydropower development and its impact. Moving forward, BIRN will continue monitoring environmental issues, strengthening partnerships with environmental CSOs, and developing internal environmental guidelines to guide its reporting and advocacy efforts.

Results Framework Tree

