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**NEWS BY
SELDI
MEMBERS**



ALBANIA'S NEW ACTION PLAN AGAINST CORRUPTION 2020-2023

On 30 April 2020 the Albanian Minister of Justice and National Coordinator Against Corruption held a virtual meeting of the Coordinating Committee. This meeting discussed important issues addressed in the Draft Monitoring Report 2019 regarding Inter-Sectoral Strategy Against Corruption and the subsequent Draft of the New Action Plan Against Corruption 2020-2023, as well as strategies for improving future cooperation. A large number of CSO representatives participated the meeting and gave their opinions. Mr. Preci, executive director of SELDI's member ACER, provided his evaluation of the presented documents and suggested that the 2020-2023 program includes a review of the legal framework for SPAK (anti-corruption prosecutor's office). He also recommended that the Supreme Audit Authority be included in the new action plan as a responsible authority.

(ACER, April 2020)



WHAT ROLE DOES THE PARLIAMENT OF NORTH MACEDONIA PLAY DURING A PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS?

The outbreak of COVID-19 in the world has an impact on all countries – both developed and developing countries, such as the Republic of North Macedonia. SELDI's member IDSCS underlines that in a state of emergency, the Parliament plays a crucial role in reaching two goals. The first goal is to ensure oversight over the executive power. As political decision-making processes in a state of emergency are understandably accelerated, this warrants the transfer of legislative competences to the Government. However, the separation of powers is not abolished in a state of emergency. On the contrary, the Parliament and the judiciary have an important role in preventing potential overstepping and abuse, taking into consideration that in a state of emergency rights are restricted and procedures are urgent, incorporating fewer control mechanisms. While the Parliament has established independent and regulatory bodies to perform such oversight, the direct participation of MPs to this cause may allow progress toward the second goal – the negotiation and securing of consensus between political players.

(IDSCS, May 2020)

2020 EU-WESTERN BALKANS SUMMIT IN ZAGREB: NEED OF STRONGER COMMITMENT TO INTEGRATION EFFORTS

Heads of states from EU member states and Western Balkan countries met virtually on 6 May 2020 for an online Western Balkan Summit co-hosted by the European Council and the European Commission under the Croatian Council. In light of previous EU-Western Balkans summits, IDSCS expected that the 2020 Zagreb Declaration would consolidate the region's strengthened commitment to integration efforts and enlargement perspectives by way of stronger political steering and high-level engagement. Despite this, there was no reference to the new enlargement methodology nor the 2025 framework envisioned in the 2018 Credible Enlargement Perspective: 6 flagship initiatives (strengthened rule of law, enhanced support for socio-economic development, digital agenda, reinforced engagement in security and migration, increased connectivity, and support for reconciliation and good neighbourly relations), as well as the follow-up Sofia Priority Agenda. There was also no announcement of the next EU-WB summit in two years' time. The expression of commitment towards the Western Balkans European perspective will require a follow-up connected to the general debate on the "Future of Europe". Indeed, the Future of Europe conference, organised by the Vice-President for Democracy and Demography, Croatian Dubravka Šuica, will only "be half-baked" without the participation of future members.

(IDSCS, 07 May 2020)

HOW NORTH MACEDONIAN CSOS ARE TACKLING COVID-19

SELDI's coordinator, MCIC, has prepared a detailed list of activities and CSOs that are contributing to an effective response to Covid-19 in different aspects. By May 2020, more than 150 organisations in different parts of the country have implemented 500 activities. The activities are grouped by region, type, product and kind, and the data is updated regularly.

(MCIC, April 2020)

COVID-19 ACTIVITIES

In times when the whole world needs to adapt to the new circumstances due to the coronavirus, the civil society organizations are among the first ones recognizing the emergency and acting in solidarity towards their communities. They are faced with the challenge to close their offices, adapt their services to the isolation, as well as to show a high level of innovativeness.

Date	Organization				
Product	Sector	Type			
Show	10	entries	Search:		
Date	Organization	Link	Activity description	Product	Sector
+ 08.5.2020	Association ESE	https://cutt.ly/rymQcFy	Signs of abuse	Factsheet	Gender issues
+ 08.5.2020	Youth Educational Forum	https://cutt.ly/uymQbYK	Online course for Argumentative Expression	Educational content	Education

A THIRD OF THE CITIZENS OF NORTH MACEDONIA HAVE HIGH HOPES FOR EU NEGOTIATIONS

A survey showed that the citizens of North Macedonia are generally optimistic regarding the topic of European integration. When asked: which of the Western Balkan countries will be the first to join the EU? 36.7% of citizens chose North Macedonia, while 17.2% believe that it would be Serbia. According to one third of the citizens (34.8%), North Macedonia will join EU within 5 years, while almost a quarter think that it will happen in 10 years.

Regarding the expectations of the negotiation process, more than half of the citizens (56.4%) expect that the beginning of the negotiations will contribute to the improvement of the judicial reforms, while one third (33.3%) does not have such expectations. One third (31.6%) expect that the standard of living will be improved, while 19.4% do not expect improvements. Moreover, a quarter are optimistic that emigration will decline as talks begin.

As far as corruption is concerned, those who believe that with the start of negotiations it will decrease (41.7%) are a larger proportion than those who believe that it will remain the same (39.8%). A total of 13.0% expect that corruption will increase with the start of negotiations.

(MCIC, 30 April 2020)



ANTI-CORRUPTION NEWS FROM THE SEE REGION

The current section of the Newsletter presents a summary of the latest anti-corruption news from the SEE region, based on consolidated information from multiple sources, such as media outlets and narratives received by the SELDI project partners.

EROSION OF MEDIA FREEDOM IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE DUE TO COVID-19 CRISIS

A panel discussion organised by Center for Study of Democracy in Sofia and the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung focused on the space for media freedom in SEE during the COVID-19 crisis and the increase in government control. The panel of experts, including anti-corruption civil society organisations and public policy think-tank from Southeast Europe, recognised a democratic backsliding in the region concerning transparency, censorship, media independence and authoritarian trends that exacerbated pre-existing trends in media capture.

This crisis further eroded elementary principles of liberal democracy, as the rule of law and democratic check and balances have been pressured in Southeast Europe. The increase of executive power and the State of Emergency left much space for abuse of power and [mismanagement of international donations and emergency funds](#). This has resulted in a call for transparency on both the distribution of funds from donation and public procurement by policy institutes across the region part of the Anti-Corruption coalition SELDI network.

ALBANIA'S WHISTLE-BLOWERS STILL 'AFRAID' TO SPEAK UP

The implementation of the Albanian Law on Whistle-blowing and the Protection of Whistle-blowers, passed in 2016, remains an issue. The High Inspectorate of Declaration and Audit of Assets and Conflicts of Interest (HIDAACI) reports that "from 2017 to 2019, it handled 38 cases of whistle-blowing and 5 cases of protection against retaliation, in several public institutions. The Inspectorate's investigations concluded that none of the cases had entailed retaliation, either direct or indirect, from the institution." The Albanian Helsinki Committee (AHC) further reports that since the approving of the law in 2016 until 2019 had been only one case of whistle-blowing found among 11 Albanian Ministries. This dearth may be explained as a result of government workers' lack of familiarity with whistle-blowing legislation and procedures. They may also remain silent in fear of retaliation.

(Exit, 27th April, 2020)

AMIDST EMERGENCY LEGISLATION, THE ALBANIAN SUPREME AUDIT FIGHTS PUBLIC FUNDS ABUSE

The Albanian Supreme Audit Institution has set up a working group to record cases reported in the media on abuses of public funds and assets during the pandemic. These cases will be prioritised in their fight against corruption. In such a situation, the emergency legislation carries significant risks for deformation of procedures and misuse of public funds, with eventual damage to the State Budget. Referring to the guidelines of the Group of States against Corruption (GRECO), ALSAI states that "while emergency legislation should be effective in procuring vital health equipment, control over public spending may be weakened and procurement systems may become easy targets".

(Panorama, April 27, 2020)

CDT WARNS AGAINST CORRUPTION RISKS IN NEW MONTENEGRIN SOCIAL ASSISTANCE LAWS

Amendments to the law on the financing of political entities and election campaigns are currently underway in Montenegro. The current law forbids the granting of social assistance during the election year, as well as spending of the current budget reserve. Changes to this legislation would help the most economically vulnerable categories during the epidemic. However, this is a field marked by potential mismanagement. The current spending of the budget reserve is not transparent and involves a high degree of internal secrecy. These changes suggest, according to the opposition and some of the public, the possibility of corruption in terms of the allocation of funds in the election period to the benefit of the ruling majority. CDT thus proposes the introduction of parliamentary control and full transparency of social benefits in order to prevent abuse and corrupt practices. **(Center for Democratic Transition, April, 2020)**

TRANSPARENCY INTERNATIONAL MACEDONIA: GOVERNMENT'S CRISIS DECREES BEAR RISK OF CORRUPTION

The Anti-Corruption Organisation Transparency International Macedonia (TI) has asked the Government and all authorised institutions to submit timely reports about decrees implemented by the Government which may carry within them a higher risk of corruption. TI Macedonia stated that it will monitor the implementation of the decrees through the Law on Free Access to Information of Public Character. Due to great delays in these reports, TI has also requested the Government to act timely upon all requests for information submitted in accordance to this law. TI Macedonia stressed the Decree for applying the Law for Protection of the Population from Contagious Diseases during a state of emergency as among the most dangerous concerning corruption. This decree carries risks regarding concluded agreements with hotels that will serve as state quarantine facilities, as well as the transportation of the people returning from abroad into state **quarantine**. **(TI-Macedonia, 27 April 2020)**

THE SHOW GOES ON FOR SERBIAN PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS IN JUNE

The upcoming parliamentary elections in Serbia will be held on 21 June 2020, even though the possibility of gathering people in political rallies during the campaign is uncertain. Nevertheless, the largest opposition group – Alliance for Serbia – remains poised to boycott the elections due to unfair conditions, such as pressure on voters and lack of media freedoms. **(Danas, May 4, 2020)**

SCPC TO INITIATE MISDEMEANOUR CHARGES AGAINST 10 PUBLIC PROSECUTORS

According to the Annual Plan for Monitoring the Asset Declaration and Conflict of Interests, the asset declarations of the former prosecutors of the SPO are subject to verification. In the procedure for determining the factual situation, the SCPC obtained data from the Ministry of Finance, and based on this data it concluded that the former special public prosecutors had continuously received additional income (allowances). Moreover, after exceeding the value of 20 average salaries, they had not submitted an updated asset declaration, which is contrary to Article 85 of the Law. Based on the above, the SCPC decided to initiate misdemeanour proceedings against 10 public prosecutors.

(SCPC, 10 April 2020)

CSOs IN NORTH MACEDONIA PROTEST AGAINST GOVERNMENT CUTS IN FINANCIAL SUPPORT

The CSO sector called upon the Government to amend its decision to drastically cut financial support for civic organisations, which was announced in the Official Gazette on the 9 April 2020. With this cut, financial aid will either be cancelled or substantially decreased depending on the institution. According to the joint press release by 73 civic organisations, networks and platforms, "The decision was adopted in an opaque way, without any consultations with the civic organisations and the general public which illuminates the unprincipled relation of the government towards the civic society during this period of crisis."

(Macedonian CSOs platform against corruption, 21 April 2020)



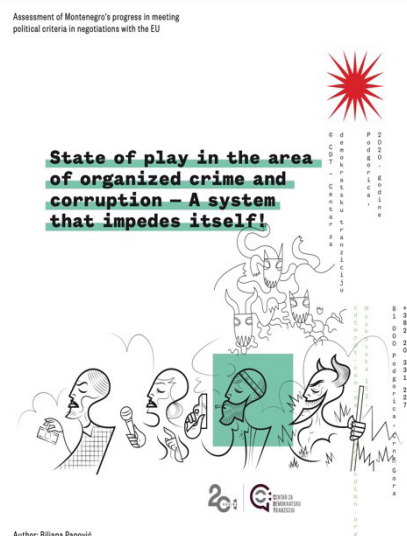
**REPORTS
AND
ANALYSIS**



STATE OF PLAY IN THE AREA OF ORGANISED CRIME AND CORRUPTION

A high-level, efficient fight against organised crime and corruption remains the key challenge to the rule of law in Montenegro. In spite of all reforms measures, legislative improvements, establishment of new institutions and activities undertaken by the existing ones, the results remain unsatisfactory: Political influence, nepotism and absence of a systematic approach are the most frequently-quoted obstacles to a successful fight against corruption. Furthermore, the key anti-corruption institution have consistently failed to confront the holders of social and political power, despite the vast resources allocated to the handling of the politically sensitive issues. The report from the Center for the Democratic Transition argue that a shift in crime repression is yet to be seen, as the system continue to suffer from a lack of capacity, low-level of coordination between institutions and poor penal policy that hinder the effective fight against organised crime groups that are threatening to penetrate the political, legal and economic sphere. While the initiation of large-scale investigations into money laundering and tax evasion is a major step forward, there is no guarantee that this would ultimately result in an effective recovery of assets and a fair sanctioning of perpetrators. This series of failures did not go unnoticed by citizens of Montenegro. As much as half the population believe it impossible to curtail widespread corruption.

(Policy paper is available in English at: Center for Democratic Transition, April, 2020)



POLICY PAPER “JUDICIARY IN THE SHADOW OF CONSECUTIVE MANDATES”

The Center for Democratic Transition (CDT) has published a policy paper “Judiciary in the shadow of consecutive mandates”. Although judicial reform has been one of the positively evaluated reform processes, progress achieving its key goals has evidently stagnated in recent years. According to experts who participated in the research, the average rating of the current state of affairs in the judiciary is 2.73 on a scale of one to five. This result indicates a step backwards compared to the previous year when the average rating was 2.91. Despite receiving better legal and by-law solutions in the most sensitive points of the reform during the first stages of the process, there have been no satisfactory steps forward. Thus, the results of the new system – of the election of judges, strengthening of disciplinary accountability, a code of ethics, application of the principle of random assignment of cases, rationalization of the judicial network amongst other important topics of this reform – remain very limited. The policy paper is available in English at: Center for Democratic Transition, April, 2020

FREEDOM HOUSE RELEASES NATIONS IN TRANSIT 2020

Freedom House has released its 2020 Nations in Transit analysis, which follows and measures the reforms, progress and setbacks in former communist states in Eastern and Southeast Europe, as well as Eurasia. As part of this report, the country data and narratives for Western Balkan countries are available [here](#). North Macedonia has advanced in criteria such as “electoral process” and “independent media”. With a 2020 democracy score of 3.75/7, this is the third consecutive year where democratic progress is improving. The country received the worst score in Freedom House’s report in 2017 with a score of 3.57. North Macedonia and Kosovo* are the only Balkan countries that are reported to have advanced in this respect. (Meta, 6 May 2020). For the first time since 2003, Serbia is not democracy, but “transition government” or “hybrid regime” where power is based on authoritarianism as a result of [incomplete democratic change](#). Serbia has also been recording negative indicators in democratic reforms and methods of governance for five consecutive years. The report explains that since coming to power in 2012, the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) has systematically restricted the opposition’s ability to be involved in governing the country. (European Western Balkans Website, May 2020)

* The designation “Kosovo” is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS HIGHLIGHTS REGRESSION IN SERBIAN FREEDOMS

In its World Press Freedom 2020 Index, Reporters without Borders ranks Serbia 93rd out of 180 countries, a marked regression from its 2016 ranking of 59th place. According to the Reporters Without Borders, after six years under the leadership of Aleksandar Vučić – first as Prime Minister and then the President – Serbia is now a country where journalism has become dangerous and where fake news is gaining in visibility and popularity at an alarming rate. “While authorities have succeeded in prosecuting those responsible for the murder of journalist Slavko Ćuruvija in 1999, most other investigations into attacks on media personnel have stalled or shelved, such as investigations into the attacks against journalist Milan Jovanović, whose house was set on fire in December 2018 while he and his wife were asleep inside”, the summary reads. (Source: European Western Balkans, May 2020)



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