

Civic Initiatives for an Open and Accountable Governance in Serbian Media Sphere:

Who has the First Step?

May - December 2018

 **ActionSEE**



This publication has been produced with the assistance of the European Union. The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of the partners of the project and do not reflect the views of the European Union.

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February, 2019



ACTION SEE (*Accountability, Technology and Institutional Openness Network in the South East Europe region*) is a network of civil society organizations that jointly work on promoting and ensuring government accountability and transparency in the region of South-East Europe, raising the potential for civic activism and civic participation, promoting and protecting human rights and freedoms on the internet and building capacities and interest within civil society organizations and individuals in the region in using technology in democracy promotion work.

The core members of the network are Metamorphosis from Macedonia, Center for Democratic Transition from Montenegro, Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability from Serbia and CA Why Not from Bosnia. ActionSEE works with partners from Albania MJAFT and from Kosovo Open Data Kosovo, well as partners from other countries in Europe and the world.

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BACKGROUND

Serbia's civil society is one of the main democracy engines in the country, however facing many problems including pressures from the government and tabloids that tend to criminalize and create an unsafe working atmosphere for civic associations. However, civil society organizations (CSOs) grew in number, while ad-hoc protest movements and civic groups emerged in the past years. Despite this, the civic sector has faced chronic funding problems for years, while those CSOs critical of the government increasingly find themselves under covert, but also publicly displayed institutional pressure.¹

Civil society organizations are often described as foreign mercenaries and domestic betrayers, not only by some political parties, far-right extremist groups and certain tabloid media, but also by the official government.² Human rights defenders are particularly facing harsh criticism from tabloid newspapers.³

The media plays a crucial role in shaping the public image of civil society. Along with a mostly negative perception of human rights defenders and CSO activists, democratic mechanisms in Serbia remain underdeveloped and citizen trust in civil society quite low.

1. Freedom House, *Nations in Transit 2018*

2. BTI 2018 Index for Serbia

3. European Commission, *2018 Report on Serbia*

The atmosphere in Serbian media is also raising concerns. Press freedom continues to erode. Journalists are pointing out that conditions they work in are worsening.⁴ They are under constant indirect pressure and know in advance what they are allowed to write and what not. In 2018, 93 cases of attacks and pressures on journalists were documented. Since 2016, 70 cases of pressures and attacks on journalists by public officials were recorded, mostly on local level.⁵ As in the case of the civil society activists, media that criticize the government are also being labeled as “traitors” or “foreign-backed propagandists” in tabloids and government supporting media.

This creates an environment of fear among journalists that provides a fertile ground for the self-censorship, leaving even less media space for civic initiatives that call for the accountable governance. Such situation is particularly visible on the local level. Journalists in smaller communities are under much greater pressure. Milan Jovanović, a journalist from Grocka that wrote critically on local government especially on administrator of municipality Dragan Simonović, had his house, set on fire and burnt to the ground in December 2018. The following month, there was an attempt of burglary in the apartment he was renting in Belgrade. This event represents a culmination of the atmosphere that is being created in the public for years, but also confirming local conditions for work of journalists. The report on Serbia published by the European Commission alarmed on the situation as well, stating that “there was no progress over the reporting period concerning freedom of expression”.⁶

4. NUNS, *Sloboda medija na niskom nivou i u kontinuiranom padu*, <http://nuns.rs/info/activities/40044/istrazivanje-sloboda-medija-na-niskom-nivou-i-u-kontinuiranom-padu.html>

5. Ibid.

6. European Commission, *2018 Report on Serbia*

This feedback, however, is any different from those that Serbia received from the European Union in the previous reports.

Bearing in mind the status quo, initiatives calling for the accountable governance, rule of law and democracy usually come from the civil society groups but remain under the media radar, distanced from citizens. These initiatives remain neglected by the main media corporations and completely ignored by official government.

METHODOLOGY

In this analysis CRTA research team explored if and how eight different initiatives across Serbia are being portrayed in Serbian media by focusing to the communication between civic initiators, the national and local media and main stakeholders. Analysis of media reporting covered the six-month period from May 2018 to December 2018. For the purpose of the analysis, the CRTA research team used the media pieces from the websites of Serbia's two public broadcasting services RTS and RTV, as well as three web editions of newspaper with the biggest reach in the country: blic.rs, kurir.rs and informer.rs. We analysed if the civic initiatives, active in the research period, and their topics were represented in the media sphere and how they were portrayed. Additionally, public image of initiatives for open and accountable governance was compared with the messages civic initiatives were trying to send out.

We conducted selection of the civic initiatives to be included in the research based on the following criteria. First, they had to be active in the six-month research period. Second, the selection was minded towards both the national and local initiatives. Finally our intention was to include those initiatives coming from spontaneously organized citizens aimed towards preserving their rights on local level, but also those initiatives strategically implemented to promote open and accountable governance.

With regard to these requirements we selected the following eight cases: Initiatives regarding small hydroelectric power plants, Initiatives regarding Valjevo's air pollution, Initiatives regarding Zrenjanin polluted water, Initiatives regarding reconstruction in Belgrade city center, research of implementation of the rights of public sector workers, protest for transfer of ownership of Niš Airport, "It isn't OK - Youth VS Corruption" and "Who is who in the local government in the Rasina district?".

KEY FINDINGS

Role of the Media

Four initiatives and topics analysed, were either poorly covered by the media or not covered at all. When this was not the case, the content mostly revolves around the problem that triggered citizens to organize, but fails to mention the initiatives themselves. Occasionally, we recorded that representatives of civic initiatives are given space in the mainstream media. However, we have also recorded that independent local media and investigative journalists who usually show interest in the topics of civic interest and provide well-covered reports, often taking the role of initiators themselves, are absent in mainstream media. Most media reports, on the other hand, predominantly contain government statements and judicial decisions relevant to the topic with mentions of initiatives, but without full background of the case. Statements in analysed media reports rarely call for accountability of main stakeholders, keeping their reporting just on the level of basic information and therefore showing no real interest to undertaking the first step in exploring the issue more in depth. In some cases, reports were composed in a defensive and justifying tone towards the government without any mention of initiators or other stakeholders. With this approach, a facade of free, responsible media is being built. In this way, the public image of problems created by the most popular media, often does not include concerns, messages and evidence civic initiatives provide. This opens the space for confusion, leaving the general public with the lack of complete and reliable information.

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However, some media such are the local independent portals Kolubarske.rs or Južne vesti, as well as investigative journalism organisations like Insajder, CINS and BIRN often take the role of initiators, but also show willingness to be first in line to support civic initiatives and hear problems that citizens point out. They often experience institutional pressure when investigating stories that might be accusing of the government. For example, Južne vesti was under firsthand supervision and investigation of tax administration for several months, while they were researching and reporting on the case of ownership of Airport in Niš in 2018. Journalist of Južne vesti had to investigate local officers in the presence of state-employed civil servants, which was a way of direct institutional pressure.

Role of Institutions

In communication between institutions and initiators, government often fails to be proactive and make the contact. Institutions hardly ever mention or encourage good examples of public initiatives, tending to address only those that are already in the public's eye. Their tone is usually justifying towards decisions criticized by civic initiatives, with statements in which representatives of government institutions rarely take responsibility.

There were cases in which their statements were directed towards the responsibility of someone else, often the other government institution. For example, in the case of small hydroelectric power plants, ministries and other institutions involved could be seen shifting accountability among each other. Moreover, it is common that questions from the media and initiators are left unanswered or not answered fully. In public announcements, institutions either ignore citizens requests or list facts and provide analysis of the problem without giving any policy propositions and ignoring the ones given by initiators. This could be seen in case of Valjevo's air pollution, where local government invested in presenting air pollution analysis but did not take any steps in solving the problem itself. Nonetheless, there were some good examples of government taking responsibility. Minister of Environmental Protection Goran Trivan, in two aforementioned cases, acknowledged the mistake the Ministry has made. He promised to initiate the procedure to change the law regarding small hydroelectric power plants, but also referred to the problem of air pollution and invited the government to act upon it.

Role of the Civil Society

Local civic initiatives and CSOs, are usually the ones taking the first step in addressing the problem and initiating the conversation through accessible media between the government and citizens. Initiative "Ne damo Niški aerodrom", the organizers of protests in Niš regarding the Airport ownership, invited representatives of local government to a public debate with representatives from the organisation. They also called on the responsibility of councilors, raised questions and initiated judicial proceedings when there were doubts of governance accountability. Other stakeholders, like public enterprises usually did not cooperate and rarely provided information the media or initiators asked for, often violating the law on freedom of information.

CASE STUDIES

Initiatives regarding small hydroelectric power plants

Topic of small hydroelectric power plants (SHPP) in Serbia has been in the public's eye for years due to the controversy that surrounds the government decisions and actions in this matter, indicating corruptive behaviour, damaging public interest and ultimately endangering the environment. It caused since 2013. Two public calls for the allocation of the sites for construction of SHPP were first announced by the Ministry of Mining and Energy in 2013 when 120 investors received 293 locations. Serbia implemented this project in order to meet its commitments to the Energy Community by 2020. During that time at the head of the Ministry of Mining and Energy was Zorana Mihajlović, who emphasized the importance of using Serbia's natural resources and building SHPP. Investors' interest was great, since the owners of SHPP would get the status of privileged producers of electricity, meaning favorable economic conditions. Center for Investigative Journalism Serbia, CINS, warned that because of this, citizens will pay higher electricity bills for the next 12 years.⁷

Furthermore, CINS wrote that due to unclear conditions for public calls, among the awarded contracts were companies in conflict with the law, companies with hidden ownership in the offshore zones and those owned by officials and accordingly, in a potential conflict of interest. Additionally, first deadline for this project implementation was December 2014, but it was prolonged for 4 years and it is not yet finished.⁸

Insajder Investigative Network and civic initiative Defend Rivers of Stara Planina raised popularity of this topic again in 2018, when evidence of environmental issues caused by SHPP construction was found.

Initiative Defend Rivers of Stara Planina, created through social networks in July 2017, launched a series of protests "Say No to SHPP" in the previous year. The biggest protest was held in the Pirot municipality, on September 2nd 2018. Protesters emphasized that total contribution of the SHPP to the energy system in Serbia is disproportionate to the disruption of nature it creates, as the construction of SHPP on small rivers would dry them out completely. This project, presented as a great way to produce renewable energy and help the environment, was doing the very opposite - it was threatening it. Defend Rivers of Stara Planina also initiated a petition to the UNESCO, currently signed by more than 7600 people.

Insajder investigated construction of SHPP Karaula on Goč mountain since July 2018. What they found is that numerous regulations for environmental protection were violated. Insajder provided a thorough investigation, also taking a role of a platform for communication between the public and institutions in-charge.

Seven SHPPs in the Municipality of Raška were built without asking for opinion of the Institute for Nature Protection. Legal procedures for environmental protection were skipped or ignored by investors and institutions.

Reporting on public broadcasting services, however remained mainly focused on problems that triggered these civic initiatives, but skipping to report on the initiative itself. Events were reported without detail or background, usually with ignorance to the citizens viewpoint, remaining uncritical towards the government. A good example of media

7. CINS, *Kroz račun za struju plaćaćemo političare i sumnjive investitore*, <https://www.cins.rs/srpski/projects/article/kroz-racun-za-struju-placacemo-politicare-i-sumnjive-investitore>

8. CINS, *EPS - Visoka cena lošeg planiranja*, https://www.cins.rs/srpski/research_stories/article/eps-visoka-cena-loseg-planiranja#prettyPhoto

9. RTS, *Da Možda Ne: Male hidroelektrane - ekološka brana*, www.rts.rs/page/tv/sr/story/20/rt-1/3321943/da-mozda-ne-male-hidroelektrane--ekoloska-brana.html

10. RTV, *Sud zabranio gradnju minihidroelektrane na Visočici*, <http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/125/drustvo/3326765/sud-zabranio-gradnju-minihidroelektrane-na-visocici.html>

11. RTV, *Banjac: Male centrale u Srbiji nisu problem*, http://rtv.rs/sr_lat/drustvo/banjac-male-centrale-u-srbiji-nisu-problem_966996.html

12. RTV, *Trivan: Bitan je cilj a ne reakcije zapadnih zemalja*, http://rtv.rs/sr_lat/politika/trivan-bitan-je-cilj-a-ne-reakcije-zapadnih-zemalja_926567.html

participation is an episode of the talk show „Da, Možda, Ne“⁹ concerning the topic, where important stakeholders met - Goran Trivan, Minister of Environmental Protection, Dragan Josić, President of the National Association of SHPP, Aleksandar Gajić from EPS and Ratko Ristić, Dean of the Faculty of Forestry which was alone in representing the opposite side in the case. However, no one from Defend Rivers of Stara Planina or from teams of journalists that investigated the cases for years, were present in the studio. In five news articles, published on RTS and RTV website only important court judgements and official statements from relevant public officials were found.¹⁰ One in a reassuring tone¹¹ and one raising important questions¹², yet again without any mention of the initiatives or initiators. Insajder had a debate on this topic, as well, on N1 television with Minister Trivan and representative of the Nature Protection Association Mirko Popović.

In other media the situation is slightly better, as they were more receptive of citizens concerns in this case. Blic and Kurir wrote from the locals' perspective about SHPP construction. Again, work done by some stakeholders was overlooked, however they focused on local protests in Rakita dealing with construction of another SHPP. Informer.rs, the most popular tabloid in the country, had no published articles concerning this topic.

Let Valjevo Breathe

Valjevo is one of the towns in Serbia that is most affected with air pollution. This problem triggered local civic initiatives that call for accountability of the local government. Main initiator was Local front Valjevo, an organization that started as a movement in Kraljevo but ran for local elections in 2016 and won 5 places in local parliament. Later a branch in Valjevo was created. Main ideas they advocate for are transparency, anti-corruption and respect of the law. In Valjevo they advocated for resolving the issue of pollution acting as an initiator and mediator of communication between main stakeholders. They successfully started a petition, requesting the municipal assembly to organize an open debate on this topic. In this case, many informally gathered citizens also took the initiative to raise awareness by putting medical masks on Valjevo's statues and creating poster art on building walls in the town.

Regarding the reaction in media sphere in this case, PBS only reported on the problem, as well as institutional reactions and measures taken. There was no mention of the civic initiative. Other media reports were very similar, focusing on scientific data collected by institutions. Mainstream media did not call upon the government to react on this problem.

Government mostly ignored the problem and did not show interest in supporting the initiatives. However, a good example is a website¹³ supported by local government, that publishes data on air pollution in the town. This project, called "Let Valjevo breathe" shows that the problem was recognized by stakeholders, but again they fail to take any action. The website only provides information on how polluted Valjevo is, without calling for accountable governance. Again, only citizens organized in movements feel responsible for taking the first step. This cannot be said for the government or mainstream media.

13. <http://www.valjevaska.posta.info/da-valjevo-prodise-faza-dva/>

Zrenjanin Together for Water

Since 2004, tap water in Zrenjanin has been banned from drinking because of the large amount of arsenic found in it. This particle is associated with bladder, kidney, liver and lung cancer.

BIRN conducted a research on arsenic affected tap water in 2017. Results show that this is a big problem in Vojvodina, where Zrenjanin is located. Two water treatment companies, Zilio from Italy and Synertech from Serbia, both registered at the same address in Belgrade, were given a permit to build a water purification plant equipped with arsenic removal devices, due to highly polluted water in this town. It was originally planned to be finished by the end of 2015. However, it was postponed multiple times. The construction works were suspended when the city failed to provide a guarantee for the payment for the first three years of operation of the plant. The guarantee was later on provided by the state government. When the plant was finally completed, a work permit was not issued, due to a law that prohibits companies that are not in public ownership from distributing drinking water.¹⁴

Motivated by the legal troubles with the water purification plant, in March 2018 a civic initiative Together for Water arised, insisting on answers from the City Council, the mayor Čedomir Janjić and Zrenjanin Waterwork Public Utility Company , a company obliged to conduct water supply to Serbia's citizens. They organized debates in local community centers, explaining what happened and providing citizens with information on the topic. They also carried out a protest at the town's main square and filed a legal complaint.

Local media portals reported on the problem regularly. Local newspaper, Zrenjanin, also took the initiative and asked questions to Institute of Public Health and Zrenjanin Waterwork Public Utility Company.

The answer from the utility company included an ultimatum, stating that they will only provide answers if the editor of Zrenjanin newspaper delivers a signed statement that Zrenjanin will publish the information fully, without corrections. This is an indicator on how the media, especially local media, is perceived. Journalism is recognized as an information service for the authorities. Media should only communicate reports given without any fact-checking, analysis or interpretation. Regarding mainstream media, we found no published articles in Informer with only two in Kurir and Blic that reported in December how the plant was put into trial and how Zrenjanin citizens will have clean water, in 14 years. PBS wrote about the problem, especially PBS of Vojvodina. However, media with national range again did not mention the initiative at all. Institutions were not interested in working with citizens and the initiative.

Local authorities did not show initiative for solving the problem and national government took over their responsibilities. Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabić addressed the problem on multiple occasions and apologized to the citizens of Zrenjanin for not resolving the issue. Despite, the government was quite silent for almost a year since they started handling the problem, until recently when the trial period in the water purification plant was proclaimed.

¹⁴ BIRN, *Toksične slavine - arsen u vodi*, <https://javno.rs/analiza/toksične-slavine-arsen-u-vodi->

Pedestrians are not athletes

In 2015 Belgrade city authorities started with reconstruction of the city center, creating a pedestrian zone. The mayor, Siniša Mali, often appeared in the media promoting the project. Since the beginning, citizens living in streets under reconstruction pointed out mistakes that occurred in the process, but were overseen by the authorities. In September 2018, reconstruction of Topličin venac street started. Residents alarmed on the missing building permit, frustrated by poor organization of site installation and lack of information.

Pešaci nisu maratonci [Pedestrians are not athletes], a civic initiative gathered around the idea of functional access to the city center and residents' complaints on the expansion plan for the city center pedestrian zone, alarmed that the building permit for this case has been rejected. Goran Vesić, deputy mayor, a few days later addressed the residents' criticism, discrediting their concerns and stating for N1 television that there is a building permit which will be public soon. On that same day, Belgrade City Department of Transportation, investor in this project, withdrew its request for a building permit. Later, Pešaci nisu maratonci reported that local authorities filed another request and issued a building permit on "reconstruction within the existing regulation" on the same day, concerned that this regulation is disproportionate to side effects it caused.

Repeatedly, initiative comes from citizens, with the support of independent media. Pešaci nisu maratonci raised awareness on the issue on social media platforms, started a petition on the case and filed a complaint the Department of Inspection Affairs of the City of Belgrade and the Ministry of Construction, Transport and Infrastructure. The institutions and mainstream media fail in validating citizens' criticism, with media only announcing the upcoming works and publishing officials' statements without providing comprehensive reports. Only a few days before construction started, RTS published an article titled "Topličin venac becomes an open-air museum"¹⁵ talking up the new city plan and not raising any questions. Representatives of city institutions avoided questions raised by the public, likewise ignoring the problem.

15. RTS, *Topličin venac postaje muzej na otvorenom*, <http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/125/drustvo/3260451/toplicin-venac-postaje-muzej-na-otvorenom.html>

Airport Konstantin Veliki in Niš

Transfer of ownership of the airport "Konstantin Veliki" from the city authorities of Niš to Republic of Serbia was implemented without any compensation in June 2018. The official transition to the hands of the state occurred in August 2018, together with the shift of management. The transfer caused mass protests in Niš gathered under initiative "Ne damo Niški aerodrom" that lasted through the whole process.

Local portal juznevesti.rs reported in detail on this case following the development of the situation with a good background to the problem. Reporting on the case of Airport „Konstantin Veliki“ in Niš in the mainstream media was according to aforementioned examples. Only one article stated that civil initiative exists with statements taken from citizens at one of the protests in Niš. There was no background on the protest in the news it was mostly statements from government officials as seen in the SHPP case, neglecting the protests themselves.

It isn't OK - Youth VS Corruption

Association "Children's Center" in Zaječar with internet portal "Za Media" created a local initiative, whose goal is the development of anti-corruption culture and strengthening the values of democracy with high school students in Zaječar. Through educational modules, workshops and debates they learned about recognizing corruption and reporting it, as well as the role of the media in the formation of public opinion and the importance of media freedom in context of corruption.

As a small local initiative it did not get any media coverage, excluding the portal that has been a partner on the project. This certainly is not a lonely case. Most local initiatives promoting democratic values and educating citizens on democracy, especially focused on the youth, cannot be seen in the local media.

Employment of Workers in the Public Sector

Ban on employment in the public sector has been in force in Serbia since 2014 and was due to end by 2016, yet after several delays, it has been prolonged. The reason for the introduction of this measure was the reduction of public sector expenditures. However this policy has been criticized due to its ineffectiveness since the beginning.

Association "Učitelj neznalica i njegovi komiteti" in cooperation with portal radnik.rs conducted a research resulting with a database on the type of engagement of public sector workers in order to determine how many workers are there and how are they engaged in local governments, public institutions and enterprises. The aim of this research was to determine whether and how the rights of workers in the public sector are violated by engaging them in contracts that are inadequate for the work they perform in order not to violate the ban on employment.

This topic has been quite relevant in the mainstream media, with them reporting on the official government decisions concerning this problem. However, as in many other cases the initiative itself did not get any coverage in the media.

Who is Who in the Local Government in the Rasina District?

Center for investigative journalism Kruševac conducted the project "Who is who in the local government in the Rasina district?" which aim was to bring local representatives closer to citizens and provide useful data, strengthening democracy on the local level. Profiles of over 60 politicians from local self-government in Kruševac, Trstenik and Varvarin were analyzed and published on portals krusevacpress.rs, rasinskiparlament.com and 037info.net. In addition to publishing profiles of local politicians, politicians' promises and the level of their performance were analyzed as well. This initiative was well covered in the local media, though the mainstream media did not cover it. In local media it was portrayed in a neutral manner.



This project is funded by the European Union



The "Accountability, Technology and Institutional Openness Network in South East Europe - ACTION SEE" project is implemented by Metamorphosis Foundation, Westminster Foundation for Democracy, CRTA - Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability, Citizens Association Why not?, Center for Democratic Transition, Open Data Kosovo (ODK) and Levizja Mjafti.