# Analysis of opportunities for CSO’s engagement



**through case studies in media**

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**PUBLISHED BY:**

*Center for Democratic Transition*

##### ADDRESS:

*Moskovska 153 81000 Podgorica, Montenegro*

**ТEL:** *+382 20 331 227*

**WEB:** *www.cdtmn.org*

## PROJECT COORDINATOR:

**Metamorphosis Foundation** Macedonia [www.metamorphosis.org.mk](http://www.metamorphosis.org.mk/)

**ACTION SEE** (*Accountability, Technology and Institu- tional Openness Network in the South East Europe region*) is a network of civil society organizations that jointly work on promoting and ensuring gov- ernment 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.

**ActionSEE**

The core members of the network are Metamor- phosis 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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ANALYSIS OF MEDIA REPORTING

Opportunities for action of CSOs through examples of events covered by the media

According to the data from the Ministry of Public Administration (January 2018), 4627 associations, 173 foundations and 115 foreign civil society organizations (CSOs) are registered in Montenegro. Last year, 371 new CSOs were registered in Montenegro. The largest number of registered CSOs is active in the fields of culture, human rights, arts, formal and informal education, agriculture and rural development, social and health care, civil society development and volunteerism, as well as environmental protection.

According to the latest public opinion polls, the level of trust in NGOs is on about the same level as in 2017. According to CEDEM data, public trust in NGOs was 41.2% in December 2018 and 50.1% in June. The public recognizes civil society services, but due to uncertain financial sustainability, CSOs apply for all funding opportunities, which jeopardizes their ability to respond to real needs and priorities of the community (CSO Sustainability Index, 2017).

By active participation in the society, CSOs propose legal solutions and advocate for changes in different areas of their activity. Regardless of the polarized media community which influences the manner of reporting on activities of the non-governmental sector, CSOs intensively develop partnerships that include joint research, publication of articles, and joint advocacy for certain changes.

However, in order to find out how the media communicates about initiatives, activities and topics in the field of good governance, which are the basis for democratic development of a country, we have analyzed a dozen cases reported in detail by Montenegrin online, printed and electronic media. Through case analysis we will try to answer some of the key issues and offer recommendations for improvement of involvement of CSOs in the media.

The key issues to be addressed in this analysis are: what is the topic (time period, key stakeholders, access to information ...), who is initiating this topic (agenda setting, research, policy proposal, supervision function, external factors ... ), who participated, what was the role of the media, what was the role of government institutions (attitude, approach, capacities, skills ...), what was the role of CSOs (initiator, participant ...) who began communication, what is the level of cooperation between stakeholders, what is the main channel of communication, how was this topic advocated, which best practices can be identified ...

1. Conference on “Openness of the executive authorities in the region and Montenegro”

At the initiative of the Center for Democratic Transition (CDT) a conference on “Openness of the executive authorities in the region and Montenegro” was organized in Podgorica with the aim of presenting the results of the same research conducted by this organization in cooperation with partners from the ACTION SEE regional network. CDT, as the initiator of this event, brought together representatives of state institutions involved in the research, as well as non-governmental organizations dealing with issues of good governance and other actors. This was an opportunity to advocate for enhancing the openness of institutions, as representatives of state institutions, which are the key target group of this research, could directly hear research findings, get acquainted with the methodology, and consider further steps for improving the current situation. With this approach civil society organizations have been able to further promote policy proposals that contain research findings and recommendations for improvement. With the use of social networks as a channel for informing citizens about activities and new researches, CDT has used this event to invite traditional media to report on the meeting of representatives of institutions and CSOs and to pass on to the citizens a more objective picture of this dialogue, as well as to get involved in advocating for more open institutions. The report from this conference and the key findings have been broadcasted by several electronic and print media as well as several television companies. Statement of the Director of CDT Dragan Koprivica on findings of the research and statements of key speakers - Head of EU Delegation to Montenegro Aivo Orav, as well as State Secretary of the Ministry of Public Administration Goran Jovetić were the focus of the news. The media reported on the statements regarding the fulfillment of the research indicators, the methodology used, the significance and purpose of the research, evaluation of the general state of openness in institutions, as well as individual assessments. It is interesting that the same contents of this conference were broadcasted in all the media, and only the length of article or running time of a television report varied. Based on this, it is concluded that the media exclusively used the report from the conference published on the website of the Mina news agency.

1. Interparliamentary Conference on “Independent and modern public administration in the EU and in enlargement countries”

One of the key issues in the field of good governance was discussed at the conference on “Independent and modern public administration in the EU and in enlargement countries” organized by the European Parliament in cooperation with the Parliament of Montenegro and the Regional School of Public Administration (ReSPA), which hosted the event. The conference was addressed by the Minister of Public Administration, Suzana Pribilović, Vice-President of the European Parliament, Ryszard Czarnecki, and President of the Parliament of Montenegro, Ivan Brajović. The media largely reported on this event by transmitting the most important views of the speakers, but it was not explained whether representatives of civil society organizations or experts in the field of public administration participated in the debate. This event was made available online and in electronic media in Montenegro and represents yet another one in a series of events organized by state institutions with the aim of bringing Montenegrin public closer to the importance of public administration reform. Nevertheless, it is necessary to have civil society representatives as well as experts from this field discuss this topic, as well as to have their opinions equally heard in the media, which was missing in this case.

1. Partnership of CSOs and media “Confidential public procurement away from public control”

Through the project of mini grants awarded to CSOs by the ACTION-SEE Regional Network, the Institute Alternative in cooperation with the Center for Investigative Journalism (CIN) was dealing with the subject of confidential public procurement in Montenegrin institutions. Having in mind that this research center has been investigating this area for a long time and that it provides recommendations for improving the current state of affairs, this project represented one more opportunity for further exploration of this area and advocating for a greater level of transparency in partnership with the media organizations. Initiator of this action, the Institute Alternative, through a set of different project activities, offered expert knowledge to journalists of the Center for Investigative Journalism and thus enabled newspaper articles to be as contentious and educative as possible for citizens. The Center for Investigative Journalism has included the Ministry of Defense as a media partner through journalistic articles and thus allowed the institution's representatives to get acquainted with the research findings and to provide an explanation of the report of the State Audit Institution dealing with the issue of confidential procurement of this institution. Although the Center for Investigative Journalism was a media partner whose articles were published on the online portal Vijesti, other media also reported on this important initiative. An important segment of this initiative were the innovative ways of presenting infographic data as an additional media content, which made the articles of the Center more interesting and easier for understanding. A final conference was organized by the Institute Alternative and the Center for Investigative Journalism, attended by representatives of non-governmental organizations and experts from this area, which made this advocacy process more substantive.

1. Affair “Signatures” - social action

The campaign for the 2018 presidential election was marked by massive misuses of citizens’ signatures in support of several presidential candidates. The first anonymous citizen complaints came to the CDT, which, with the support of all Montenegrin media, succeeded in organizing public action and advocating for introduction of a web application that would allow citizens to verify if their data was misused. For a few days all press, electronic and online media, including TV companies, have announced a call to citizens to report data misuse, as well as information on the number of complaints filed to the State Prosecutor’s Office. The media have included the State Election Commission (SEC) in the reporting process on this case, announcing the creation of a support signature verification application. An important place in this reporting process was also given to the State Prosecutor's Office, which regularly provided information on the proceedings initiated in this case. The media, in parallel, monitored the public actions and press conferences of presidential candidates accused of misuse of personal data, while the TV “Vijesti” hosted a thematic show where the candidates expressed their views, denying any unlawful action. For more than ten days in almost all the media at the local and national level, we could hear information about the campaign that this CSO initiated with the help and support of the media, which was then followed by rapid reaction of state authorities. In addition to traditional media, CDT has also used social networks as a channel of communication with citizens and reporting of misuses. This affair resulted in the State Prosecutor’s Office forming cases which the media continued to follow.

1. Vanja Ćalović - case of dismissals in the Agency for Prevention of Corruption

A large number of press, TV and electronic media reported on the case of initiating a review of the existence of conflicts of interest in work of the member of the Council of the Agency for Prevention of Corruption, Vanja Ćalović Marković, as well as her subsequent dismissal from this body, most intensely during June 2018. The media that reported on this case broadcasted the statement of Vanja Ćalović Marković, who said that she had submitted a complaint to the Administrative Court against the decision of the APC. Printed media were most commonly pointing out the opposing views of the head of the APC Sreten Radonjić and the member of the Council of the APC Vanja Ćalović Marković, as well as the background of their conflict and formal and legal details regarding the reasons for her dismissal. The European Commission also got involved in this case, as well as a number of non-governmental organizations that appealed to the Parliament of Montenegro, that is, the relevant committee, not to unlawfully dismiss Ćalović Marković. Given that opposition parties spoke on this case as well, the media reported almost daily on the new reactions of different social actors. Beside the fact that the civil sector had a strong initiative to prevent illegal dismissal of Ćalović Marković, as well as intense media reporting on this case, they still failed to achieve the common goal. By the votes of the ruling majority in the Parliament Ćalović Marković was dismissed, and the Administrative Court later confirmed that the decision was illegal. Yet, in this action, the civil sector has taken an important place in media reporting, as the case they initiated was the dominant topic discussed in the public for seven days.

1. Biciklo.me - an example of advocating for better conditions for cycling

An NGO Biciklo.me organized in May a public forum on “Better Traffic, a Better Town”, where representatives of the election lists for the upcoming local elections in Podgorica have spoken and the citizens and representatives of other social organizations were able to participate as guest with their questions. At the forum itself, during the introductory presentations, the results of the research that the NGO Biciklo.me carried out on the prevalence of this type of transport among the citizens of Podgorica, as well as on the problems that citizens have identified as the most important in the use of bicycles in this municipality were presented. The daily newspaper “Pobjeda” reported on this event in the section “Chronicle of Podgorica”. In the article we could read the conclusions of the representative of the NGO Biciklo.me Sonja Dragović, as well as parts of presentations of the political party representatives regarding their current ratings of traffic in the Capital City, as well as suggestions on how this condition can be improved. The forum was participated by representatives of political parties and decision-makers, as well as representatives of civil society and interested citizens. Thanks to the initiative of Biciklo.me, citizens could get informed on this event via social networks, however in the traditional media, there was no a bit more detailed reporting about the event.

1. Identification Number vs. Personal Identification Number

In June, the Center for Democratic Transition (CDT) held a press conference inviting the Government to consider the introduction of Personal Identification Number (PIN) in order to prevent massive misuse of personal data, as was the case when collecting candidates support signatures for presidential elections. At the conference, it was assessed that the existing Unique Citizens Identification Number is available to everybody and that it can be found in several public registers and databases and that it is “compromised to the extent that it renders the Law on Personal Data Protection completely meaningless”. The CDT believes that although the process of change would be expensive and time-consuming, it would eventually simplify administrative procedures, facilitate data exchange among institutions and increase efficiency in the fight against corruption. The report from the conference was published in almost all online media, as well as in daily news of televisions with national coverage. As a continuation, the daily newspaper “Pobjeda” prepared reactions of MPs to the CDT proposal during June. Representatives of the authorities and the opposition, as well as representatives of the State Election Commission, expressed their views on this proposal. After the published research, other Montenegrin media did not report in detail or further elaborate this issue which is of direct relevance to the protection of personal data of citizens. This case reaffirmed that research of CSOs often remains only at the level of media reporting from the presentations or conferences without a detailed explanation or additional media analysis that would contribute to the advocacy process for introducing a personal identification number.

1. An appeal for amending the Law on Free Access to Information

The media in Montenegro often report cases of non-compliance with the Law on Free Access to Information, and almost every month at least one example where the interested party was not able to realize its right under this law can be found. The largest number of cases pertains to executive authorities, representatives of citizens, political parties and courts, but also the economic organizations that have been given a concession to public property management. The greatest attention of the media and the civil sector was drawn to amendments to the Law on Free Access to Information, which were adopted by the Parliament at the proposal of DPS representative, and that enabled hiding key information from the public. During June 2018, the media gave most of the space to reactions of the NGO MANS, which considered that amendments are a step backwards in terms of the right to free access to information, and that they enabled hiding key information from the public and that they are encouraging corruption. In addition to this organization, other NGO sector representatives have provided some more tangible indicators of the quality of implementation of this law, so the Institute Alternative has published several studies on both the quality of information services and public perception of public administration work. The NGO sector agrees that the silence of administration represents the biggest obstacle in implementation of this law. The impression is that ordinary media reporting creates a controversial atmosphere mainly representing the opposing views of information seekers and the institutions that have enabled or not this right to be exercised. In these exchanges, the accusations on the account of personal competences are prevailing, so it seems that the media did not dedicate enough time to independent research and queries about implementation of this law and the exercise of this right. Moreover, by the way in which cases are reported, a reader may be confused about the competences of the institution, as we often encounter the information that the Agency for Personal Data Protection and Free Access to Information has made a dissenting opinion from the Administrative Court and that a certain authority has referred to that opinion. In media appearances and reports, it is noticeable that there is no clear explanation of the civil sector and the media what are the concrete problems of the law and how they can affect the informing of citizens.

1. Optimization of public administration

Although this is a very important area of ​​public administration reform, it does not get enough space in the media. Media reports on this topic mainly contain statements by officials or non-governmental organizations dealing with this topic without any detailed explanation of what a rule, procedure or regulation implies in practice. On the occasion of celebration of the Public Administration Day, several printed and online media published only a few sentences of the Minister of Public Administration Suzana Pribilović, as well as a statement by the CDT on the adoption of the Public Administration Optimization Plan. Both statements were transmitted very sharply and without a detailed explanation of the cause and context that would enable citizens to understand what the problem is in this area. The Institute Alternative also gave its press release on adoption of the Plan. After that press release, TV Vijesti made a report focused on the number of employees in the state administration who would remain unemployed in accordance with this Plan, and the Weekly newspaper Monitor analyzed this issue. Although this story was initiated by non-governmental organizations at a time when this topic was very important, there was no comprehensive cooperation with the media.

1. Open Data Portal

At the initiative of the media, an article was published on the launch of open data portal, which began its work without any content. With this article, the media indicated that the Ministry of Public Administration, in accordance with the law, initiated this portal but did not prepare any content for publication other than the list of state administration bodies. To illustrate this case in more detail, the media involved civil society organizations - who spoke from their angle on this case. The Institute Alternative explained that the content of the portal was not legally prescribed and that it will depend on the good will of the institutions what will be found on it, while MANS considered that the basic problem is in the Law on Free Access to Information and that this should be resolved first. The Ministry of Public Administration, as the initiator of the project, was also involved in this media case, and it referred to the fact that the website was still in preparation. CSOs have analyzed this problem through cooperation with the media, but it cannot be concluded from the article what the advocacy message is and what they wanted to change in the specific case. However, this case is useful as an example of involvement of CSOs and an institution on the topic initiated by one media.

11. Fairness and not Bias – Eradicate Cronyism!

Through one of the projects supported by the ACTION SEE Regional Network, an organization from Podgorica called 35mm has been working to raise public awareness and open a dialogue on cronyism and recruitment in public administration based on political and other affiliations, and not on qualifications. This project included training for journalists and cooperation with most Montenegrin media who conducted a research and published articles on this phenomenon. Recruitment based on different affiliations, and not on the basis of qualifications, is an extremely present problem in Montenegro, which was detailed in this project. What makes this initiative different from others is the inclusion of journalists from different media, regardless of the polarized media community. Through the cooperation of CSOs and media representatives, there were several months of research and data collection, after which journalists wrote stories, checked data and published articles. A series of articles on cronyism, including government officials and opposition, was published in the media with various reading audiences, and thus influenced the informing and awareness of as many Montenegrin citizens as possible.

12. Fake news – Raskrinkavanje!

Spreading disinformation is a global problem that exists in Montenegro as well. A public debate was initiated on this issue through initiatives of non-governmental organizations, as well as the actions of some state authorities, with the support of domestic media. Within the framework of the regional project “Raskrinkavanje”, CDT has launched the same platform in Montenegro aimed at raising citizens' awareness of the importance of media literacy and careful consumption of media content. At the initiative of the TV Prva, the preliminary findings of the Raskrinkavanje.me platform were presented in the news program of this television during November. Journalist crew of the TV Prva tried to present to citizens in an interesting way the role of non-governmental organizations in combating disinformation and why it is important to carefully consume media content. On a specific case, the TV Prva showed how to analyze newspaper articles and check controversial allegations. Moreover, an important aspect of this media appearance was informing citizens that they can report the controversial content to the Raskrinkavanje platform, if they notice it in the media, and thus contribute to countering propaganda and unverified information. Given that the latest public opinion polls show that television in Montenegro is the dominant source of information to citizens, civil society organizations are increasingly choosing domestic television as media partners that have an influence on forming citizens' opinions and through which they can best promote their activities. Due to the great impact of the television program, cooperation between the media and the civil sector is particularly important when it comes to promoting new online tools that require additional animation and citizen involvement.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING THE POSITION OF CSOs IN THE MEDIA

Based on the analysis of a dozen media cases which included cooperation of CSOs, media and institutions for advocating for new legal solutions or changes in certain areas, we have made several recommendations for improving cooperation between CSOs and the media, as well as for improving the position of NGOs in the media space.

* Improve cooperation and intensify communication with journalists who follow certain areas

In the process of advocating for a solution or change, CSO should first define its advocacy goals. Afterwards, in the process of selecting methods and advocacy tools, CSO should recognize with which media in the country it could achieve cooperation and continue to advocate through that cooperation and to advocate through journalistic articles its suggestions or solutions. By analyzing the selected media cases, we have concluded that CSOs cooperate with the media, but that they rarely cooperate with journalists who actively and regularly follow a specific area that is the focus of CSO work and who can continuously report on any changes in a particular area. By cooperating with journalists that are focused on the same areas, a CSO can in more detail and more intensively cooperate with the media, initiate topics or inform journalists about new solutions from that area.

* Prepare a media plan before the conference / event is held

Having in mind that media reports from events or conferences organized by CSOs in Montenegro are mostly identical, with the same statements, of almost identical length or running time, we suggest that CSOs, before organizing an event, should make a mini media plan with interesting guests or topics that can represent to a journalist “another or different angle of a story”. Given that CSO conferences are often attended by guests from the region or the world, it would be important for journalists and the media to be informed in a timely manner about the possibilities of recording an additional interview or some other content related to the area of ​​activity of the participant, which is not in direct focus of that particular event.

* Prepare media for presenting research after the press conference

By analyzing media cases, and having in mind the experience so far, it is noticeable that after presenting a research or a policy proposal, the media rarely continue to further analyze the issue or to report in more detail on the presented problem. Their reaction, which would include reactions of decision-makers or experts from that area, is largely an exception. Therefore, we propose that CSOs, along with presenting a research, prepare a mini plan on “what to do after the conference” and through cooperation with media and journalists focusing on the area within which research was conducted initiate a series of future topics or ideas. In this way, CSOs are strengthening their advocacy component and through cooperation with the media include institutions and contribute to the proposed solutions actually being implemented.

* Develop joint projects involving multiple media

Given that different fund competitions encourage cooperation between CSOs and the media in order to improve some area, we suggest that both parties recognize such opportunities for improving the situation in the society through a joint initiative. In line with their scope and focus, CSOs should identify areas where they need cooperation with the media and initiate joint action. Through project realization, apart from cooperation and advocacy for better solutions, the media can gain additional knowledge and project management skills from CSOs while CSOs can upgrade their media performance capabilities or communication skills.

* Strengthen cooperation both with the media and institutions through initiation of media stories

In numerous initiatives and cooperation between the media and CSOs, an important role is that of representatives of institutions that directly influence the implementation of solutions proposed by non-governmental organizations through media initiatives or other advocacy methods. Within journalistic articles or other media content, CSOs and media should involve representatives of institutions and enable them to get acquainted with the views of non-governmental organizations, with their criticisms and suggestions for solutions. Moreover, through media stories, representatives of institutions would have the opportunity to communicate their views on the current issue as equals spokespersons. Without mutual cooperation that involves both the media and CSOs and decision-makers, it is hard to expect a quality and argumentative discussion.

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