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CONTEXT

The political crisis continued to prevail in the public discourse in 2016. The lack of implementation of the June/July (Przhino) Agreement by four biggest political parties led to postponing the early parliamentary elections and a new Agreement Przhino2 in July 2016, facilitated by representatives of the International Community. The latter foresaw postponement of the election date for the second time (the new date is set for December 11, 2016).

The early parliamentary elections of December 11, with a tight outcome have led to ongoing negotiations by political parties for forming a new government, focused on two issues: support to the Special Public Prosecutor and the use of language of the Albanian community.

The European agenda of the country has been stagnating and even further deteriorating, as democracy and rule of law continued to backslide.

The Government continued to take actions countervailing the very goals of the Przhino process, clearly attempting to avoid its political responsibility for the massive wrongdoings indicated by the scandal for interception of communications revealed last year. Such was the massive abolition by the President of personalities involved in the scandal for interception of communications. A decision that was reverted only by strong pressure by the international community. Separation of state and party remained a critical issue. Resistance to the Special Public Prosecutor was evident not only by the Government, but by the courts and the “regular” Public Prosecutor Office. The protests of the “colourful revolution” continued on a daily basis until July 2016, demanding restoration of rule of law and expressing support for the work of the Special Public Prosecution Office.

The rise of populism and tendencies towards illiberal democracy within EU have presented even a bigger challenge for developing a new narrative for the EU agenda of the country. In this situation, EPI offered a specific narrative, connecting its domestic democracy and rule of law agenda with its belonging to Europe. EPI continued its advocacy efforts, individually and through networking, aimed at contributing towards the resolving of the political crisis, separation of state and party, restoring rule of law, and a substantial inter-community dialogue as the only way forward to restore and re-create a sustainable European agenda for the country.

This year marked the fifth anniversary of EPI, and efforts were made to take stock of the realization of EPI mission and vision and strategic goals which remained unchanged so far. EPI has successfully adapted its work without deteriorating from its goals despite the backsliding in core democratic areas and has managed to keep the EU debate on the focus.

PROGRAMMES

ACCESSION MONITORING AND ADVOCACY

Commentaries to progress reports

In 2016 EPI produced a comprehensive analysis of EC Country report for Macedonia.¹ EPI's regular analysis and commentaries of the EC reports are already branded and recognized as a product. The publishing of the analysis elaborated after a unique methodology, which allows for comparability, immediately after the publication of the Report, accompanied by a short commentary makes it an attractive product for a wider audience, including state officials, the civil sector and the media. Since a comprehensive objective analysis of the EU progress reports of the Western Balkan countries has been lacking, in 2016 for a first time EPI with other think-tanks in the region produced an analysis of the EU Country Reports on Western Balkan countries.² This publication is policy analysis of Western Balkan countries progress and preparedness in the accession to the EU based on the 2015 Reports published by the European Commission. This is the first structured attempt to provide an analysis of the EU Country Reports on Western Balkan

¹ Available at: <https://goo.gl/eyoXlt>

² Available at: <https://goo.gl/ALFNWW>

countries and their immediate follow-up, on the basis of a harmonised methodology and unique approach by a group of CSOs.

FORUM EUROPAEUM

The Conference *Is a new EU narrative for the Balkans feasible?* was held on 17 March 2016. The purpose of the Conference was to encourage an open and constructive debate on the process of enlargement of the EU with regard to the transformation of the Balkans and the impact of the EU, including the European neighbourhood. The conference tackled two key topics, including first, ***the Balkans' transformation and EU leverage: prospects and pitfalls*** and second, ***Regions and neighbourhoods: beyond the "lessons learned"***. Members of the council of EPI (see below on page 13 for a list of names), including the Deputy Prime Minister for European Affairs at that time and the former Deputy Prime Minister for European Affairs had their addressing remarks related to the forum's topic.³ The main conclusions of the conference underlined the need to re-engage with the citizens for creating pressure for democratic reforms as well as the need to recalibrate EU's approach so as to emphasize substantive democratisation processes.

Group for advocacy of the Western Balkans 6 (WB6)

EPI took part in the establishment of the Group for advocacy of the Western Balkans 6 (WB6). This Group is an initiative of the Western Balkans CSO's from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo, Macedonia and Serbia, which aims to help speed up the process of integration of the whole region in the European Union.

The Group developed Advocacy Strategy for the EU Integration of the Western Balkans – Guidelines (ASWB), produced by the Albanian Institute for International Studies, European Movement in Montenegro, European Movement in Serbia, Foreign Policy Initiative BH, with the financial aid from RCC, GIZ and Visegrad Fund. Visegrad Group peer partners contributed to the development of the ASWB – Centre for Eastern Studies, Center for European Neighbourhood Studies, Europeum Institute for European Policy and the Slovak Foreign Policy Association.

The Group presented the ASWB in Brussels and in the Western Balkan capitals. EPI promoted the WB6 and ASWB on 19th December 2016 in the premises of the EU Info Centre in Skopje with significant participation of the expert and policy makers' community.

Western Balkans Summit Series - Paris and the way ahead

On 24th November 2016, The European Policy Institute (EPI) – Skopje together with Centre international de formation européenne (CIFE) and the Austro-French Centre for Rapprochement in Europe (CFA/ÖFZ) held roundtable and debate entitled "Post-Paris, Post-Brexit – Perspectives for the Western Balkans" as a part of the "Western Balkans Summit Series - Paris and the way ahead". The roundtable was opened and moderated by Ms. Malinka Ristevska Jordanova, Director of EPI- Skopje. As a panellists were Ms. Isabelle Marchi - Barbaux representative from the French Embassy in Skopje; Mr. Tobias Flessenkemper from the International Centre for European Studies (CIFE); Mr. Florent Marciacq from the Austro-French Centre for Rapprochement in Europe (CFA/ÖFZ); and Ms. Sonja Risteska from Analytica – Skopje. Some of the topics which were discussed during the round table were: State of the European Union, Connectivity / Infrastructure, Regional Youth Cooperation Office, Civil society involvement, Migration and mobility, Political situation in EU member states, Future of the "Berlin process" etc.

Dialogues for Vision (British Embassy, May 2015- March 2016)

(Project budget: 95.820 GBP; Grant: 95.820 GBP; Donor: British Embassy)

In the project, completed in March 2016, EPI selected and supported six background papers in three topics (foreign investments, democratic checks and balances and integrated education) and organised three debates with stakeholders in the relevant thematic fields.⁴ EPI's role in conducting the research was to provide methodological guidelines for the research and the debates as well as organising external peer review and follow up. Six studies were supported dealing with the following topics: foreign investments, checks and balances and integrated education. All six papers were subjected to independent peer review. In addition, a thematic resource base (www.d4v.merc.org.mk) was established to facilitate the research. In the period February – March 2016, three debates were held following a specific format. Representatives of state bodies participated at the debates, ensuring communication of the researchers with policy makers. In this case, EPI acted as an agenda setter in the three thematic areas and established an informal network with high quality researchers in the country and abroad.

In terms of impact, the products and debates public interest, and the research commissioned as part of this project has been communicated further to the policy makers, including through feedback and response from the International Monetary Fund, American Chamber of Commerce in Macedonia on the analysis of the foreign direct investments in Macedonia and academics. The research and debate on foreign investment was especially attractive to media. On the other hand, the debate on integrated education, which provoked interest only on media in Albanian language, was highly competent, with a constructive approach by present representatives of official authorities. The debate on checks and balances in the Macedonian political system, although expected to rise most interest, had the lowest turn-out, probably because main political actors were avoiding this debate. The findings on the checks and balances debate were presented at the Paris Reflection Forum held at the end of May 2016.

The Western Balkans and its EU integration – 2015 Comparative Overview: Follow up of EC country reports (independent analysis of TEN Network, November 2015 – February 2016)

(This was a self-initiative project, which was funded in cooperation with the project partners)

Following EPI's regular analysis and commentaries of the EC progress reports and based on its unique methodology, the members of the TEN Network engaged in an independent comparative analysis of the EC annual reports for the countries of the Western Balkans. Having in mind that a comprehensive objective analysis of the EU progress reports of the Balkan countries has been lacking, this was the first structured attempt to provide an analysis of the EU Progress reports and their immediate follow-up. The comparative analysis was coordinated by EPI on the basis of a harmonised methodology and unique approach. The intention of the network was to formulate this activity as a regional project and started fundraising in 2016, which resulted with the BENCHER project.

The aim of the project was to provide an objective and critical assessment of the accession process on an annual basis as well as an assessment of the Enlargement strategy, while also providing recommendations to the EC and the national governments for short/long term reforms.

The 2015 comparative overview – The Western Balkans and its EU integration was published in February 2016. The overview addressed the EC methodology, the challenges and prospect ahead and provided an analysis of the fundamentals in the Western Balkans. The methodology included graphs that encompassed the progress and preparedness of the countries for EU integration and presented the regional average. In addition, the comparative analysis offered an insightful view into the reactions of relevant stakeholders within the countries. The comparative analysis was disseminated widely to EU institutions and national stakeholders.

⁴ The researchers were selected on a public call published in November 2015, at which 27 high quality applications were received.

Deliberative poll: National EU debate (CIVICA MOBILITAS, July 2016 – March 2017)

(Project budget: 1,991,096 MKD donor: CIVICA MOBILITAS - action grants)

The objective of the project is to increase the involvement of the expert and general public in a deliberative poll regarding the gains and losses of Macedonia's EU accession. The project has been envisaged as a forum for exchange of ideas so to enable constituencies to be directly engaged in the process of public debate. With this it aims to provide a model of consulting and informing the public, which will contribute in bridging the gap between the issue of chronic lack of consultation and debate, especially when it comes to EU related issues. As a polling method, the Deliberative Poll seeks to account for the preferences and opinions of citizens both before and after they have had an opportunity to arrive at considered judgements based on information and exposure to the views of fellow citizens. As project implementation started in July 2016, EPI established cooperation and communication with the Center for Deliberative Democracy (CDD) at Stanford University. Among the first project activities was preparation of a desk analysis of existing research on perceptions about EU integration in Macedonia that have been conducted in the past 5 years. For the purposes of the project, EPI's project team invited a group of experts in the field to be members of an advisory group, whose main goal is to provide fruitful and insightful comments for the topics covered with the deliberative poll and conducted a focus group. In January, the project team conducted a focus group with the members of the advisory group, to discuss the topics and the content of the briefing materials, so as to ensure that they are balanced and unbiased.

DEMOCRACY AND RULE OF LAW

Monitoring of the URP and the Przhino Agreement

The implementation of the Przhino Agreement and the Urgent Reform Priorities is significant for overcoming the political crisis. Having this in mind, EPI published two policy briefs in January: "How is the Przhino Agreement Implemented?" and "Implementation of Urgent Reform Priorities slower than the restoration of anti-reformist practices". Both contained situational analysis and future recommendations and were based on a detailed monitoring process.

In addition, as an effort for structured monitoring of the implementation, a status board of both the Przhino Agreement and URP are set-up and regularly updated on the MERC web site. These products were very well received among the media and the policy community, especially the European Commission.

Network 23 + (EU Delegation, IPA, January 2016 – December 2017)

(Project budget: 313506 EUR; Grant: 250805 EUR; Donor: EU delegation - IPA Civil Society Facility and Media Programme 2014)

The European Policy Institute (EPI) – Skopje as a lead, in partnership with the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights of the Republic of Macedonia (MHC), on 1st of January 2016 started the implementation of the project "Network 23 +". Associates to the project are: Centre for Policy Modernisation Foundation – Sofia, GONG – Croatia, European Policy Centre – Belgrade and Institute Alternativa – Podgorica. The project will be implemented during the course of two years. As extension of the previous action (Network 23), Network 23 + has been designed as an evolution and progression for CSOs engagement in monitoring and evaluation of Chapter 23 through evidence-based policy making and advocacy events as policy bridging initiatives.

Based on the positive results of the previous grant scheme under Network 23 project, a new re-granting scheme was also introduced for capacity building of local civil society organizations. The re-granting scheme was launched through a public call for CSO's, which encouraged applications focusing on monitoring and evaluation of a selected topic related to a specific issue under Chapter 23 by providing evidence-based policy analysis, including data

obtained using bottom-up approach, case-study analysis, interviews with stakeholders on local level, focus groups and surveys on citizens perception etc. Following established criteria, 9 applications were selected through a thorough evaluation process. Capacity building for grantees is realized through workshops and mentoring.

The Shadow Report on Chapter 23 for the period July 2015 – April 2016 was prepared and published. This report is result of the regular monitoring of the Network 23 members and other CSOs on the areas under the Chapter 23. Additionally, implementing partners on behalf of Network 23 are regularly publishing monthly briefs on Chapter 23- Judiciary and Fundamental Rights. Main findings of the Shadow Report were officially presented on a press conference held on June 16th. The event was attended by media representatives, including Network 23 members, other CSOs and representatives of the institutions. This publication was also disseminated to a wide list of stakeholders, including national stakeholders, journalists and media representatives, EU embassies and EU institutions. The findings of the Shadow Report were presented at meetings held by partners with representatives of EU and international organizations. The findings of the Shadow report were presented to the European Commission (within advocacy visit of project MERLIN). Furthermore, monthly briefs for Chapter 23 are regularly produced in cooperation with Helsinki Committee of the Republic of Macedonia.

An advocacy trip to Brussels took place on 28-29 November 2016, with participation by EPIs Director Malinka Ristevska Jordanova and Uranija Pirovska, Executive Director of the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights. At the meetings with representatives of DG Near and DJ Just, as well as MEPs, the two directors presented the recommendations of the Shadow report and discussed input of the Network.

WeBER - Western Balkans Enabling Project for Civil Society Monitoring of Public Administration Reform (IPA II Multi - beneficiary CsFM, December 2015 – December 2018)

(Project budget: 1.3.411 EUR; Grant: 1.146.070 EUR; EPI's share: 190.000 EUR; Donor: European Union- IPA Multi Country Programme)

WeBER is implemented by a consortium of seven think tank civil society organizations (CSOs), gathered through or partnered up with the Think for Europe Network. The overall goal of WeBER is to increase the relevance, participation and capacity of civil society organisations (CSOs) and media in the Western Balkans (WB) to advocate for and influence the design and implementation of public administration reform (PAR). In the long run, the WeBER should help prepare and empower the civil society in the WB to continue pushing for EU membership compliant PARs in these countries once they accede the EU and external EU conditionality is no longer the driving force behind these reforms.

The WEBER project has evolved beyond its inception phase into the development of the methodology for the PAR monitor and building strong partnerships with the stakeholders. EPI representatives participated at the meeting of the long-term grants of the EC in Brussels end of June presenting the project to the European Commission, including the unit dealing with public administration reform. The project has been presented to SIGMA and has built partnerships with the RCC and the Regional School of Public Administration (RESPA).

EPI commenced with the design of the grant scheme for re-granting for 30 organizations throughout the region (all six Western Balkan Countries). EPIs experience in re-granting national organizations has been transferred to regional level. EPI is managing and coordinating the grant scheme design and later on EPI will coordinate its overall implementation, as well.

Blueprint for Urgent Democratic Reforms (Self-initiative, May 2016 – July 2016)

(Budget: n/a, Donor: n/a; Self-initiative of group of CSOs)

The civil society organizations continued the efforts to contribute towards the resolving of the political crisis. In the period May - July 2016, a Blueprint for Urgent Democratic Reforms was prepared as joint initiative and cooperation of several CSOs, academics and experts in providing guidelines and detailed actions for achieving progress in multiple policy areas. EPI was in the core group for preparation of the document, and lead organisation for the part on Public Administration. These recommendations were meant to contribute to restoring the democratic standards and values and to bringing back citizens' trust in the key public institutions. The Blueprint proposed that an expert government be established in order to create a level playfield for elections and ensure separation of state and party. Given the degree of state capture by the ruling parties, the CSOs advocated the priority focus to be on the reforms instead of the date of the elections. This initiative was not part of a formal project and it was not supported through any domestic or foreign funds. It was a reflection of the clear vision of the civil society organizations, academy and experts.

Justice: Governance for Growth Monitor - JudGMeNT (RCC, July 2016 - January 2017)

(Project budget: 44.000 EUR; Grant: 40.000 EUR; EPI's contribution: 4000 EUR; Donor: Regional Cooperation Council - RCC)

Through this project, structured monitoring of the implementation of SEE 2020 Strategy on Justice dimension of the Governance for Growth pillar was initiated and implemented for the first time. Despite the short implementation period, especially amidst the greatest political crisis since 2001, EPI managed to attract attention of the crucial stakeholders, and create demand for structured and focused information and recommendations on the measures covered.

EPI managed to involve the most relevant CSOs and thematic experts, who have the given expertise and knowledge of the areas of efficacy of judges and the courts, cross-border cooperation, take overs, acquisition and mergers and ARDS, which enabled optimal access to relevant information. This combination bridged the gap between (non)institutional set up and aided the identification of practical recommendations for improving the progress in the set Priorities subject of this Action.

The project helped considerably in facilitating information on progress and public discussion on needed reforms to be undertaken in the three priority areas. For the first priority, efficacy and competence of the judges and the courts, the project has picked-up and amplified the challenging situation and linked this to the SEE 2020 Strategy adding a regional dimension. For Priority 2 exchange of information on cross border information on take overs, mergers and acquisitions, the project enabled for the first time to develop specific monitoring methodology, report the situation and provide policy recommendations on how to improve the situation. For Priority 3 ADR, the implemented activities proved to have an extremely high added value for stakeholders, since it helped mediation to be widely promoted among the public and stakeholders and raise awareness of key challenges being faced in improving its implementation.

Combating barriers for exit - Macedonian Roma at the borders (OSI, January 2016 - March 2017)

(Project budget: 77.970 USD; EPI's share: 32.640 USD; Donor: OSI Think Tank Fund - Roma Initiative office)

The implementation of the project "Combating barriers for exit: Macedonian Roma at the borders" began on December 18th 2015, and lasts until March 2017s. The project is a partnership between EPI and the Roma NGO KHAM from Delcevo, Macedonia. The project consisted of research activities that contribute to the understanding of the problem of Roma migration and exit refusals in the aftermath of the visa liberalisation through the preparation of a drafts of the following documents: methodological guidelines (finalised), baseline study, focus groups, media

analysis and analysis of court cases. In addition, a guide for victims of discrimination upon exit was prepared which was distributed at the borders. As part of the advocacy activities for the project meetings were held with the Border Police, Minister of Interior and with stakeholders in Brussels (European Commission, MEPs, think tanks etc). Through this project EPI contributed to the decision of the Ministry of Interior to recognise the problem of Roma profiling publicly and opened up a broader policy discussion on the matter.

Monitoring and Evaluating the Rule of Law in the Western Balkans (MERLIN WB) (EFB, January 2016- January 2017)

(Project budget: 29.960 EUR; grant: 29.960 EUR; Donor: European Fund for the Balkans (EFB))

The project set up regional coordinative mechanism for democracy and rule of law mirrored through the implementation of Chapter 23 – Judiciary and Fundamental Rights and Chapter 24 – Justice, Freedom and Security in Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro, as well a common methodology and framework for monitoring progress in the implementation of rule of law in the WB countries. The project was implemented by EPI – Skopje as lead organization, Institute Alternativa – Podgorica (IA) and Belgrade Center for Security Policy (BCSP).

The activities of the project resulted in the preparation of three national case studies and a regional, comparative policy brief, as well as documents that map out all relevant national and regional networks that work in the field of rule of law. Each of the three partner organizations prepared and published a national study by the end of November and organized public events to present the studies. A regional, final event – policy forum - for presenting all three national studies and the regional policy brief was held in Skopje on 7 December 2016, organized and hosted by EPI, preceded by a press conference. The research findings, conclusions and recommendation of the national studies and the regional brief were published by national media in all three countries. The information about the project on EPI's social media reached around 3000 views.

The European Fund for the Balkans (EFB) and the Open Society European Policy Institute (OSEPI), in May 2016, organized advocacy trip to Brussels, which was attended by representatives from EPI, BCSP and IA as part of the MERLIN initiative Meetings took place at the Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers (DG JUST) and the Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR), with members of the Committee on EU enlargement of the Council of European Union (COELA), as well as with the European External Action Service (EEAS) representatives. The advocacy meetings were used to send an early warning on the widespread backsliding in political criteria for EU accession in the Western Balkans

The roundtable discussion “Rule of Law in the Western Balkans: Improving the conditionality mechanism of the chapters 23 and 24 of the EU enlargement negotiations” was held at the premises of the OSEPI and provided an opportunity for the experts on EU Enlargement from the Brussels-based organizations and guests from the European Parliament to get engaged in a direct discussion with MERLIN representatives, where the later presented the progress under the chapters 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights) and 24 (Justice, Freedom and Security) in their respective countries.

Equitable Representation in Public Administration (USAID, January 2015 – March 2016)

(Project budget: 42.182 USD; Grant: 38.682 USD; EPI's contribution: 3.500 USD; Donor: USAID - Foundation Open Society - Macedonia)

The project focused on the integration of new employees in the workplace and diversity management. The final study “Life and numbers” was published, including a pivot model for diversity management. The study covers: methodology of the research, current legal framework, and the perceptions of the employee in the state administration regarding the principle of equitable ethnic representation and the integration in the work place and the pivot model. The development of the pivot model was assisted by Publinc, Netherlands and it introduced measures and activities for advancing the equality of the communities. Infographic of the key and most heated findings was delivered, as well. The study “Life and numbers” was presented at the final

conference held on 9 March 2016. It was attended by MPs, representatives of the institutions, CSOs, academia, diplomatic missions and experts.

IPA MONITORING PROGRAMME

The programme on the monitoring of the use of the IPA funds has been in the background in this reporting period however activities were undertaken to upgrade the database for IPA II. We have regularly updated the IPA database and have participated in the national activities of the IPA mechanism. In addition, brainstorming session was held on how to improve visualisation of the database. A fellow under the Programme Young Professionals of the Think Tank Fund⁵ was employed in EPI for six months doing research on the Use of IPA funds focusing on Public Administration Reforms following a mixed methodology – including both quantitative and qualitative analysis.

EU ACQUIS AND SECTORAL POLICIES

This program contributes to maintaining the focus on *acquis*, despite the limited field for *EU acquis* related research and advocacy in Macedonia.

RRPP- Care for the carers: Policy analysis of informal care provision in Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (SDC, June-November 2016)

(Project budget: 19.998 CHF; Grant: 19.998 CHF; EPIs share: 11.069 CHF Donor: Regional Research Promotional Programme- Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation-SDC)

This project was an upgrade to the completed RRPP funded project **(In) equality in social protection: multi-level analysis of inter-sectionality in social assistance provision - a comparative study)** (RRPP, August 2015- March 2016). The objective of the project was to analyse the informal long-term care with focus on informal carers, as well as policy advocacy efforts in Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The starting premises of the project were: first, that informal long-term care is not recognized as a social risk by the welfare state in Macedonia and BiH despite the complex socio-economic and demographic changes; and that concrete policies and measures allowing for sustainable care strategies and acknowledging the needs and coping strategies of carers and their dependants are absent. With this in mind, EPI and Analitika devised policy recommendations based on the conducted interviews and focus groups integrated in the policy brief.

Interviews were conducted as planned with relevant stakeholders from both countries including the Ministries of Labour and Social Policy Centres for Social Work and international and NGOs working in the field of social protection and also two focus groups with NGOs and citizens involved in the social protection system. Their recommendations were integrated in draft policy briefs presented and discussed at two round tables. The final versions of the policy brief were published with the recommendations from the round tables.

⁵ EPI applied and was selected to receive assistance under this programme in 2015.

RRPP-Centre of Expertise on Policymaking Systems in the Western Balkans - CEPS WeB (SDC, June-November 2016)

(Project budget: 50.873 CHF; Grant: 50.873 CHF; EPIs share: 2.215 CHF Donor: Regional Research Promotional Programme- Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation-SDC)

The project aim was to further support of the work of the TEN network and its partners in establishing a ***Centre of Expertise on Policymaking Systems in the Western Balkans – CEPS WeB***. For this purpose, in addition to preparing the strategic documents of the Centre the activities of this project have set the grounds for the formal extending of the TEN network with partners from Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo.

Three professionally moderated interactive workshops were organized in order to further establish the basis for the Centre, where we've set the strategic approach, including the vision mission and objectives, developing the written procedures, prioritizing the areas of work. Also six case studies discussing good practices of centres of excellence were produced.

The final event of this project was held at the end of November 2016 where the final Position Paper of the Centre was presented to policy makers in Belgrade.

Building the next generation of youth leaders (CIPE, July 2016 – August 2017)

(Project budget: 88.640 USD; Grant: 88.640 USD; Donor: Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE))

European Policy Institute with cooperation with Youth Educational Forum are implementing the project "Building the next generation of youth leaders". The project is funded by Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE). The project strive to engage a core group of young Macedonian leaders in civic participation and entrepreneurial activity, and increase informed public discourse of key democratic and economic issues.

Within the project EPI will support youth fellows to investigate the institutional factors contributing to youth unemployment and exclusion from the policymaking process, and share the findings at a stakeholder roundtable and through new media. The fellows will be mentored during the research phase by experienced researchers from EPI and will engage with the policy-making community through round tables and discussions.

Regional Programme for Support to Research: National Dialogue for Promotion of Public Policies in Macedonia, (SDC, April 2016 – November 2016)

(Project budget: 3840CHF Donor: Regional Research Promotion Programme, 01.04.2016 - 30.10.2016)

The Project aimed at constructing a new financial model supporting the research community and scientific research in Macedonia and would improve the quality, efficiency and impact of research activities. As part of this project, EPI participated in the research activities related to the processes for evaluation of research submissions and prepared a draft chapter in the policy study published at the end of 2016.

NETWORKING and ADVOCACY

On July 2016 the Network 23 members held their annual meeting in order to discuss the realization of the objectives and results set out in the Network 23 Strategy for the period 2015-2020. It was assessed that output indicators at annual level were fulfilled. During the reporting period, number of Network 23 members has increased by joining of the organization

“Multikultura” from Tetovo. The multi-ethnic dimension of the Network 23 was strengthened with this expansion. Also, other organizations that are part of the re-granting scheme under the project “Network 23+” expressed their interest to join the network. In addition, the Network 23 applied for participation in the Programme for Capacity Building of CSOs Networks, implemented by TACSO Macedonia. In the period 21-23 November 2016, representatives from the Network 23 members European Policy Institute, Institute for Human Rights and Coalition “All For Fair Trials” participated in a workshop at which an Action plan for strengthening the capacities of the Network 23 was prepared. Through *Network 23*, EPI managed to further deepen the cooperation with the members but also expand the target groups with the current pro-reform actors, by holding meetings representatives of courts, the Special Public Prosecutor and other institutions, at which they discussed the possibility of cooperation and joint activities in the future.

As part of advocacy activities at national level, the Network 23 announced its statement regarding the appointment of 28 judges by the Judicial Council in September, which can be assessed on: <http://www.merc.org.mk/aktivnost/9/soopshtenie-po-povod-najaveniotizbor-na-novi-28-sudii-od-strana-na-sudskiot-sovet-na-republika-makedonija>.

Intensified cooperation with other national think tanks and other CSOs resulted in joint initiative for the direction in which the key reform priorities should be aimed, whose precise text is consisted in the document named *Blueprint for Urgent Democratic Reforms*. The built cooperation with national institutions was maintained, mainly by their presence on EPI’s events. Moreover, within the RCC financed project *Justice: Governance for growth MoNiTor – JudGMeNT*, EPI brought new topic in the public discourse, such as the regional cooperation.

Networking and advocacy efforts were also visible on regional level. EPI took part in the establishment of the Group for advocacy of the Western Balkans 6 (WB6). This Group is an initiative of the Western Balkans CSO’s from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo, Macedonia and Serbia, which aims to help speed up the process of integration of the whole region in the European Union.

Cooperation with the *Think for Europe Network* members was broadened under the project for establishing a Centre for Excellence in Policymaking Systems of Western Balkans (CEPS WeB). The Centre will provide a platform for joining of expertise and analytical capacities. These initiatives are of great significance towards establishing coordinated approach to other regional and international stakeholders.

The advocacy activities beyond the Macedonia’s and the regional public were continuously developed. Brussels targeted advocacy was further approached with the visit realized in May 2016 within MERLIN project, November 2016 within Network 23+ project and February within the Combatting barriers for exit project. Meetings were held with representatives from DG NEAR, DG JUST, COREPER/COWEB, MPs and Brussels based think tanks.

Due to the increased role of Germany in resolving the Macedonian crisis, EPI decided to approach the MS capitals as well. In this direction, in September 2016 a joint advocacy trip of EPI and IDSCS was organised in Berlin. The benefits were twofold. Firstly, it contributed to strengthening partnerships and cooperation nationally and secondly it reached to new group of stakeholders. Meetings were held with relevant Berlin-based stakeholders, such as representatives of the Bundestag and Committee of European Affairs, Parliamentary group on South East Europe, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, representatives of political parties and policy analysts/advisors to political party representatives actively involved in monitoring the Western Balkans. Moreover, an open event was organised in cooperation with the German Council of Foreign Relations (DGAP). The event took place at their premises and was held on September 23, 2016 in Berlin, to discuss the EU’s and Germany’s role in addressing the crisis of Macedonian democracy. A follow up visit is currently under preparation in partnership with the Institute for Democracy and the Centre for Economic Analysis.

At the national level, EPI is regularly invited to consultations and meetings with embassies, the Delegation of the European Commission as well as visits of EU officials including Commissioner Hahn as well as the MEPs working on the country. These meetings have been a significant opportunity for advocacy based on our project findings as well as overall mission of the organisation.

COMMUNICATION

As the political crisis continued to prevail during the reporting period, communication and advocacy activities were largely targeted in the context of consultation on the resolution of the political crisis. The demand for products of the systematic monitoring of the Urgent Reform Priorities and areas under the Chapter 23 remained high. EPI strengthened its position as reliable source of information.

EPI in the media

- **Media mentions:** EPI was again significantly present in the media. EPI made appearance in 130 media articles, out of which, EPI representatives participated in 15 TV debates, and the 115 media articles either contained opinion from EPI's experts, or covered the events organized by EPI. Out of the 130 media articles, 96 were published in Macedonian media, 29 of them in Albanian language, and 9 in international media. EPI maintains an image as a go-to organization for EU policy and integration issues, EU foreign affairs, PAR and Rule of Law. In a time of deep political and media polarization, the organization is viewed a credible source for both pro-government and pro-opposition media.
- **Number and type of publications:** During the reporting period, EPI published 4 analyses, 8 policy briefs, 1 working document, 17 monitoring briefs, 7 studies, 1 report and 1 guideline, and a commentary on the EC progress report. Totalling 60 publications, all of them are available in both English and Macedonian, and 25 of them in Albanian. Additionally, 8 infographics and 7 word clouds were produced as info material.
- **Citations by national institutions:** EPI participated in consultation meetings with the Supreme Court, Secretariat for European Affairs, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Information Society and Administration, National Council on Euro-integration, Committee for European Affairs.
- **Events:** During the reporting period, 37 events were organized by EPI, which helped improve the public visibility and presence of EPI. As a structured effort of the civil sector towards ending the political crisis, EPI alongside 10 other organizations presented a "Proposal for urgent democratic reforms" in Skopje, which brought the public's attention. Regarding advocacy campaigns, EPI had meetings with MPs from the Bundestag, and held a round table in DAGP premises in Berlin. EPI organized 6 workshops and one press conference promoting the *Shadow Report on Chapter 23* under the project *Network 23+*, and initiated the *JuDGMeNT* project, with a kick-off conference and methodology workshop, followed by events for presentation of the monitoring reports for each priority. EPI held two public events under the project MERLIN for monitoring the Rule of Law, covering both national and regional context. For the *WeBER* project, EPI as a part of TEN held meeting in Pristina for PAR monitor development, and inception meeting in Brussels. As a part of *CEPS WeB* project, two workshops were held in Budva and Sarajevo. Also, three interactive debates for the promotion of the studies from the project *Dialogues for Vision*, and the final study of the project (In)Equality in Social Protection was promoted.

EPI promoted the Advocacy Strategy for the Western Balkans and the WB6 Advocacy Group in Skopje, which was founded alongside 5 other organizations from the WB aiming to advocate for faster EU integration. In addition, the post-Paris and post-Brexit situation was discussed in a separate event.

- **Digital traffic and engagement:** Social media following, audience penetration and audience diversity are the following. <https://www.facebook.com/EPI.Skopje>: 6020 likes (44% increase from the start of the year with 4144 likes). In the reporting timeframe, 273 posts were delivered, with an average outreach of 3602 users. Dividing the audience in 6 main age groups, 16% are aged 18-24, a large 44% are aged 25-34 years, 21% are aged 35-44, 10% are aged 45-54, and only 9% are over 55 years old. The audience is 57% female and 42% male. Out of 6020 fans, 50% use their Facebook in English, 30% in Macedonian, 10% in Albanian and the remaining use other languages. Divided by cities, the 7 most common cities that EPI's FB page is accessed from are Skopje (3189), Tetovo (368), Kumanovo (256), Bitola (208), Prilep (171), Gostivar (166) and Ohrid (126).

The @epi_mk twitter account has 516 followers.

Hiring of a Communication Officer had a major role in communication activities of EPI. The focus was on the specific requirements regarding the communication and advocacy activities on project and programme level. In that context, the Communication Officer has facilitated creation and coordination communication activities of the organization and its project outputs on web, social media and conventional media and publications.

Participation at international conferences

In this period EPI staff has taken part in the following international events within the framework of its projects and initiatives:

- Kick-off meeting WEBER (Belgrade, February 2016)
- Kick-off meeting on Monitoring Rule of Law in Western Balkans (Belgrade, 3-7, March 2016)
- Pristina meeting - Initial PAR Monitor development, 08.06.2016, Pristina (Weber project, implemented by TEN network)
- Inception meeting Brussels, 22.06.2016 (Weber project, implemented by TEN network)
- First workshop in Budva, 11.07 - 13.07.16 (RRPP_CEPS WeB)
- Second workshop in Sarajevo 28.09 - 30.09.16 (RRPP_CEPS WeB)
- Meetings with MPs from Bundestag, 21-22 September 2016, Bundestag – Berlin (Berlin advocacy)
- Round table, 23 September 2016, DAGP premises – Berlin (Berlin advocacy)
- RESPA Conference 15-16 November 2016, Podgorica
- Constitutive meeting of the WeBER platform, 17-18 November 2016 Centre vile Hotel, Podgorica
- Promotional event of the Communication Guidelines of the WB6 Group, Brussels, November 2017

Participation:

- MAXCAP Project _ Final event, the Hague, January 2016
- Regional conference by Platforma 112 on Rule of Law in the European Union in Zagreb, 29-31 March 2016
- TRAIN 2016 Programme Opening Seminar in Belgrade, 4-9 April 2016
- Regional consultations on Post-Decade Processes for Roma, Belgrade, 21 April 2016
- "Civil Society forum Belgrade of the Western Balkan Summit Series" organized by joint initiative of the European Fund for the Balkans (EFB) and ERSTE Foundation, 11-13 May, Serbia
- REGIONAL SEMINAR "European Union and Western Balkans: fundamentals at the beginning", May 31st, Kosovska Mitrovica
- "Role of Civil Society in Public Administration Reform" organized by TASC0 P2P events, 6-7 June, Pristina

- “Europe’s Uncertain Future: Finding our Footing against Democratic Backsliding” organized by Center for International Private Enterprise, Institute for Private Enterprise and Democracy, Free Enterprise and Democracy Network (June 20-21, 2016, Warsaw, Poland)
- Balkan Security Forum, Belgrade, October 2016
- Balkan Think Tanks Convention, Prishtina, organize from Democracy for Development (D4D) (November 3-4 ,2016, Prishtina, Kosovo)
- EUROPEUM Prague Conference on Western Balkans, Prague, 27 November 201
- Security Challenges as a Link Between the Citizens and the Institutions, Belgrade, 21 December 2016

STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT OF THE ORGANIZATION

EPI continued to implement the strategy for transition of management. While the overall responsibility for the management of the organization remained with the Director, the program coordinators take over higher responsibilities for the projects under their portfolio. This internal structure contributed to smooth leadership transition process.

In terms of internal management the focus was on putting into operation the new organisational scheme empowering medium level management in planning and exercising monitoring and control. Furthermore, in the decisions for appointing staff in projects, their tasks are more specifically defined, which ensures better monitoring and control. As of November 1, all staff begun directly reporting to one of the coordinators, while the Director invested more time for internal control.

The first round of performance appraisal for the management team was carried out, which consisted of setting the goals for the year. Staff has been monitored as per accomplishing their goals, which are a combination of tasks and skills goals.

During the reporting period EPI had changes staff wise and now counts 12 employees. Among the regular staff, the Programme Coordinator for Democracy and Rule of law, Aleksandar Jovanoski, is on one-year leave, due to admission to Master studies in the Queen Marry University, London, Great Britain. The workload of this programme was delegated to the other two coordinators. Like it was planned, in July 2016 a Communication officer was engaged. The engagement of the Communication officer contributes to the facilitation of the work of the junior staff for updating the databases, publishing on EPI’s website and communication with the media. In addition, the communication officer has been engaged in communication activities in several projects and design of communication plan for specific products. Furthermore, he is engaged in improvement of the Communication strategy and its operationalization.

The researcher who was engaged under the Think Tank Young Professionals Programme in January 2016, upon termination of the contract was engaged on two other projects. Also, under the new call for researchers of the same programme, the process of selection of new researcher was completed and the new researchers begun its engagement in EPI in the beginning of November 2016. The two fellows that were contracted under the Program “Making the most of EU funds for Roma” finished their policy briefs and other obligations b September 2016. In addition, one intern was engaged since 01.12.2016, later included on one of EPI's projects.

During 2016 EPI hosted three Roma fellows. Two fellows Ismail Kamberi and Fikrija Tair were hosted in the framework of the Roma Information Office fellowship. Mr. Kamberi worked on analysing the EU's response to the rise of Roma asylum seekers, whereas Ms. Tair analysed how the issue of Roma has been represented in the EU progress reports. Ajet Osmanovski in the framework of the project Combating barriers to exit, prepared a policy analysis of the reintegration of Roma returnees.

The new employees have been accommodated in all three programme areas of EPI and are under the supervision of the respective program coordinators.

EPI staff (regularly employed) is the following:

- Malinka Ristevska Jordanova – Director;
- Simonida Kacarska – Research coordinator;
- Ardita Abazi – Imeri – Program Coordinator;
- Dejan Ristovski – Financial Officer;
- Vaska Ristovska – Officer Manager;
- Iva Conevska – Project assistant;
- Mariglen Demiri - Project assistant;
- Angel Mojsovski - Project assistant/researcher;
- Kristina Dimovska – Junior researcher;
- Aleksandar Vanchoski – Junior researcher;
- Aleksandra Ivanovska – Volunteer;
- Darko Malinovski – Communications Officer;
- Ismail Kamberi – Project assistant.

Using the occasion of the fifth anniversary of EPI, EPIs Council was constituted on the 16th of March 2016. The council consists of the following members:

- Mrs. Antoaneta Dimitrova – University Professor
- Mrs. Juliana Nikolova - Director of the Centre for Policy Modernization Foundation
- Mrs. Milada Vachudova – University Professor
- Mr. Klaudijus Maniokas, Expert in EU accession negotiations
- Mr. Dimitar Belchev – Retired Diplomat
- Mr. Fatmir Besimi – Former Deputy Prime Minister for European Affairs
- Ms. Radmila Sekerinska – Former Deputy Prime Minister for European Affairs
- Mr. Sasho Klekovski – Expert in sector analysis, analysis of organizations and management, capacity development and advocacy.

As to procedures, internal procedures for e-security (Security for Information systems, General information Security Policy, Information Security Incident Management Guide and Operations Continuity Plan Data handling and protection policy,) were developed. Anti-virus (Bit-defender) was developed. All software used is licensed (through Techsoup).

Attention was paid to acquiring skills training of the younger staff. In house training was provided to the communication officer in order to meet his responsibilities and his field of work. The training for updating the databases MERC and Dialogues for Vision and EPI's webpage and FB, were provided for the entire staff. All younger staff have attended trainings on preparation of EU project applications and EU funds.

Internal training on communication held took place Etno Selo, Kumanovo on 19-20 April 2016. The training was organized with two aims: a) to improve the communication policy of EPI and b) to improve the communication skills of the staff.

Another internal training on quantitative data analysis was held in EPI's premises on 30.05-01.06 2016. For the purposes of strengthening the quantitative analysis skills of the junior staff.

A training on working with Excel was held in April 2016 to equip EPI's staff with additional knowledge on using Excel for every-day working tasks. In June 2016, training on writing effective policy documents was attended by junior researchers and financial officer, and the administrative and financial officer attended training on volunteering and archive working. During September and October, junior researcher and administrative officer attended training on strategic planning. Furthermore Training for e-security was held. The training was organized for EPI's staff in order to be introduced with Security for Information systems, General information Security Policy, Increased DROPBOX security, use of BITLOCKER, recommendation for safe surfing

on internet, protection of documents in word and excel with password, BITDEFENDER tools and phishing protection.

In addition to the trainings planned and implemented within the organisation, EPI staff delivered and participated in a number of trainings, on the initiative of other organisations.

During the reporting period serious efforts were made to link the strategic and operational planning. Separate activity plans per project have been prepared using the Gantt chart which were used to prepare operational plan until the end of 2016 and facilitate the planning.

EPI secured mentorship from Politics&Ideas though from TTF on to monitoring, evaluation and learning practices of EPI on organisational level. Specific objectives pursued under the mentoring scheme are:

- Support to finalize the strategic plan
- Ensure overall consistency
- Support for designing and building the correct indicators for measuring long, medium and short term policy influence outcomes
- Support for designing criteria/benchmarks for evaluation of programs from the policy influence perspective
- Support for identifying the specific data collection methods/tools that work better for monitoring the established indicators.
- Pilot some aspects of the related policy influence goals– once the plan is finalized the most appropriate goal/s will be selected so as to pilot a first effort to measure their achievement
- Refine the organizational plan in its policy influence components according to results from the piloting phase.

It is worth mentioning that the development of MEL Matrix, , has contributed to assessment of available human resources capacities and plan ahead the progression of staff as well as to identify the need for new staff with specific skills that the organisation needs. It has also helped think in terms of avoiding putting staff in positions that they are not ready for and seek to develop the skills they will need in the future.