LOCAL CORRESPONDENTS NETWORK

Final Report
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- FINAL REPORT -
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Project overview

The Project Local Correspondence Network – a series of investigative stories and media promotion of the accountability of LSGUs, starts from the need of the entire community to enable accountability from the local authorities through public monitoring of their results and practicing the right to access public information. Through 16 cover stories and fact checking, and a final report that will outline the process, the Project aimed to provide information from the field related to the consistency in the implementation of the SIGMA principle on accountability.

Recent experiences indicated that almost each journalist call is being ignored, or initiates such complicated procedures, all in order to avoid taking responsibility for given information, or to avoid the naming of the source of the information which is requested from the public.

The SIGMA principle on accountability of the LSGUs anticipates that “the right to access public information is legally guaranteed and is consistently implemented in practice by the LSGUs”, however the examples from the practice implies urgent need of activities that will motivate change in the behavior of LSGUs in regards to this question. It was necessary to review existing legislation and policies and to locate the “black spots” which in practice prevent the transparency in the providing public information, as well as to locate inconsistencies in the process of proactive information sharing.

Thus, the planned project activities were: A1. - A12. Assembling the team; Engaging the reporters’ network; Workshop/training on the principles of accountability; Mapping practices of implementation of the accountability principle in LSGU; Creation and publication of 16 cover stories; Daily reporting for ad-hoc events and news; Interactive communication with readers; Daily contact and setting tasks for stories; Measuring performance; Translation of texts in Albanian language; Managing social networks; Final expert report & its promotion.

The abovementioned activities were expected to result in the following: R1. Producing and publishing 16 cover stories and daily reports about the work of the public administration on local level and preparation of final report with field data about the implementation of the SIGMA accountability principle. R2. Created tool for public pressure on the local and central government for efficient reactive and proactive sharing of public information. R3. Direct benefit for independent journalists/local correspondents, broad media audience and the citizen public, citizen organizations, local authorities. R4. Created media platform open for feedback and cooperation with citizens and citizen organizations aiming to encourage, articulate and sustain citizen influence on the local policies of the government and to support the accountability, transparency and good governance.

This Report will summarize the findings of the Project, by primarily outlining the relevant legal framework, and the guidance and recommendations for the media in that regard. It will then elaborate on the accountability principle in context of the work of the journalists and the practical of the legislation relevant for free journalism. Finally, it will provide an overview of the experience from the field during the realization of the Project, the observations in regards to the SIGMA principle of accountability of the LSGUs and lastly it will provide conclusions and recommendations for the next steps.
Legal framework, guidance and recommendations

The spending of public money imposes an obligation for transparent operation of the institutions and the justification of the spent funds. For efficient and transparent administration, the general rule applies: the value of public funds. Public administration services have value if they are delivered on time, in an efficient manner, so that they are visible, clear and easily accessible to all users. The goal of proactive publication of public information is to create an efficient, effective and transparent public administration in accordance with the principles of the European Administrative Environment and the basic elements of good governance. Proactivity indirectly points to the need to increase the level of transparency among holders of public information. The special value of the transparency of the public administration is in its integrity. Only a transparent public administration strengthens the confidence of citizens in state institutions to the extent that only a transparent government is legitimate. Transparency of the administration is essential and it:

• Justifies the existence of the administrative apparatus
• Strengthens the confidence of citizens in legitimately elected representatives of the government
• Saves resources
• Encourages the creation of a society of knowledge and competence
• Enables open institutions and a more democratic society

One of the ways of achieving transparency in public administration is in the proactive publication of information and communication of institutions through their official websites.

Good practice is considered when the information holders, by publishing their websites, make available to all citizens information that was requested from them, in accordance with the Law on Free Access to Public Information. In this way, the citizens have easier access to public information, as they can reach the requested information in a faster and more economical manner with less time wasting and with less spending of funds. Also, this way of already published, requested / given information is expected to reduce the number of requests for free access, and thus the obligation of the information holders to act upon them.

Proactive transparency allows citizens to participate in the public life of the community. The concept of proactive transparency directly contributes to democracy, in particular the quality of direct democracy, which in the modern world is achieved through the direct participation of citizens. The consistent application of the concept of proactive transparency can significantly improve the participation of citizens in decision-making at all levels. If additional efforts are required from citizens to be informed, for example, by submitting a request for access to public information, this reduces their readiness to participate in the decision-making process, as well as the volume of information that citizens have. Citizens' participation is a human right, and as such is governed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in 1948. The Universal Declaration prescribes that:

1. "Everyone has the right to participate in the public affairs of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives";
2. Everyone has the right to equal access to public services in his country;
Proactive transparency meets the principle of good governance. The principle of proactive transparency is fully in line with the principles of open administration. Proactive transparency reduces the number of requests for free access to public information that are submitted to the information holders, thereby reducing the scope of work for the person in charge of mediating public information. Proactive disclosure information is disclosed:

- Information on the regulations and the decisions of the authorities, thus exercising the right of the citizens to be informed about their rights and obligations in the society
- Information that citizens need to require responsibility from the authorities; - information that citizens need in order to access the services offered by public institutions
- Information that is necessary for citizens to participate in the decision-making process

Furthermore, the holders of public information that publish information on a proactive basis benefit on several grounds:

- Proactive transparency helps information holders to be more responsible in spending public funds
- Thus, information holders promote the principles of good governance and integrity
- Information holders are more efficient as they better manage the information they have

The legal basis for reactive transparency of information holders is regulated in the Law on Free Access to Public Information. Good practice is considered when the information holders, by publishing their websites, make available to all citizens the information that were requested from them, in accordance with the Law on Free Access to Public Information. Information holders are obliged to proactively publish all the information available to them, except for those that according to the Law are exceptions to the free access. Proactively published information should be easily accessible and understandable, can be used, be relevant, and updated regularly.


The Law on Free Access to Public Information imposes and ensures publicity and openness in the work of the information holders and enables the natural and legal persons to exercise the right to free access to information of public character.

This right is guaranteed internationally with:

- Resolution 59 of the UN General Assembly adopted in 1946
- Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948 (Article 19)
- The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of 1966
- Convention on Access to Official Documents (2009, Committee of Ministers - Council of Europe)

According to the Law, there are certain types of information that cannot be obtained. Those are:

1. Classified information with certain level of secrecy
2. Personal data which would breach the protection of personal information
3. Information about archive works which are assessed as confidential
4. Information that if given would breach the secrecy of taxation process
5. Information regarding or consisted of investigation, criminal or tort, for conducting administrative and civil proceedings, and whose disclosure would have harmful consequences for the course of the procedure
6. Information regarding commercial and other economic interests, including the interests of monetary and fiscal policy, and whose disclosure will have harmful consequences in the exercise of office.
7. Information from a document under preparation and is still subject to alignment with the information holder whose disclosure would cause a misunderstanding of the content
8. Information endangering the rights of industrial or intellectual property (patent, model, sample, goods and service mark, mark of origin of the product).

Recommendations for reply to a request for access to public information:

- The applicant is provided with an opportunity to get acquainted with the content of the requested information (insight, photocopy, electronic record or other) for which the holder prepares a record
- The request is forwarded to another information holder (in accordance with Article 18 of the Law)
- Conclusion on termination of the procedure because the holder does not dispose of the information - an appeal is allowed to the Commission
- The same information is requested from the same holder within 6 months, the holder with a conclusion terminates the procedure if the requested information has not suffered changes in the meantime (right to appeal)
- The deadline for submitting information is a maximum of 30 or 40 days (when the document is large); - The applicant for the extension of the deadline should be informed on the 27th day
- No access to information is provided within 30 days ("Silence of the administration" - right of appeal) - legal presumption - negative answer - right to appeal
- The deadline for filing a complaint to the commission is unlimited (as long as the required information is required - or as long as it considers that its right of access has been violated).
Accountability in the context of the media

Free, uncensored and unrestricted media are essential in any society in order to guarantee freedom of opinion and expression and enjoyment of other rights. It is one of the foundations of a democratic society. Every democratic society has created conditions in which the media can receive information on the basis of which they can exercise their function.

Free communication of information and ideas on public and political issues between citizens and elected officials is essential. This involves free press and other media that can comment on public issues without censorship and abstention. The public also has a related right to receive information from the media. The above legal framework, guidelines and recommendations for the proactive publication of public information is a kind of tool that protects the rights of media users, including members of ethnic and linguistic minorities, to receive a wide range of information and ideas, the Government should pay particular attention to encourage independent and diverse media. The Government should take into account the extent to which advances in information and communication technologies, such as the Internet and mobile electronic data transmission systems, which have significantly changed the ways of communication in the world. There is now a global network for the exchange of ideas and opinions that does not always depend on the mediation of traditional mass media. Government bodies should take all necessary steps to foster the independence of these new media and to allow individuals access to them. The Government should allow public broadcasting services to function in an independent manner. In this respect, the authorities will guarantee their independence and editorial freedom. They should provide funding in a way that does not impair their independence.

Practical application of the legislation in the area of free journalism

As explained by the expert on LSG Bardil Marku, who carried out the workshop for the journalists at the beginning of this Project, and as confirmed by the Editor in Chief of the news portal “Sakam da kazam” Goran Mihajlovski, when seeking information, journalists encounter various obstructions, in order to be discouraged at the very beginning. In addition, they are faced with a situation where in some institutions, information cannot be obtained in accordance with the Law on Free Access to Public Information. One such institution, for example, is the Central Registry or the Statistical Office, and the like. In these institutions, information other than those publicly available in their domains cannot be obtained unless they are paid for the required information according to the pricelist they have.

On the other hand, there are institutions such as the courts, where journalists have received some information without compensation (for example, such information include an enforceable decision, anonymized judgment or first instance decisions), if it is emphasized that the information is requested electronically via mail or on a CD.

Investigative journalism based on facts, documents and data is appreciated, but more importantly crucial element in a democratic society. It is therefore necessary to provide a climate in which journalists will have access to as many facts as possible from several institutions, which can be utilized as a foundation
for analysis for an important and relevant story. The practice also shows the need for information to be provided by several institutions. On one hand, this is due to the journalistic principle to check and obtain information from at least two sources before publishing, and on the other hand in some cases the available information, even from the same institution, in different publications show different values about the same issue. In that case, it is necessary to cross-compare the information from several institutions.

Unfortunately, the local self-government in the case of implementation of the Law is not acting differently from other state institutions, and the above-mentioned is absolutely relevant for the local self-government units. In addition to the legal regulations, recommendations and guidelines, in practice the decisive factor is the relationship that exists directly with the Mayor, despite the existence of special services responsible for providing information for the public. Hence, in practice, journalists face extremes in which access to information can be very easy or very difficult.

Similar circumstances are confirmed from the input provided by the Editor in Chief of “Sakam da kazam” and the team of journalists. Namely, their past experience shows that most journalists’ communication efforts are ignored or raise a complex procedure, all in order to avoid taking responsibility for the given information or avoid naming the source of information that is required by the public. Typically, the last instance for the journalists is the procedure for obtaining public information through the Law on Free Access to Public Information, which is linked to longer deadlines, after which the topic becomes irrelevant to the public and the media. Additionally, at central level, but especially in local environments, public relations services are only formally present, and in order to access any public information, direct contact with the Mayor is necessary. In the "Survey on the Right to Free Access to Public Information", conducted in 2013, of the Open Society Foundation, it is stated that information requests for details of concluded tenders were the most common type of information that external stakeholders were interested in. As much as 37% of information holders did not respond to requests because they said they "did not own the information", while every fifth limited access to information due to "unclear request".

Results from the Project “Local Correspondence Network”

During the period of 8 months, a total of 76 news items (see Annex A) were published by the journalists who are part of the correspondence network, comprising into 16 investigative cover stories, as expected under R1 of the Project. The stories were published on https://sdk.mk/index.php/mk/; https://sdk.mk/index.php/category/dopisna-mrezha/ and on the social media https://www.facebook.com/SakamDaKazam/ . In some cases, the cover stories were published in the local media, in the cities in which reliable local media exist, such as it was the case in Bitola. The published news items comprised the following cover stories:

1. Illegal hotel building in Lagadin, Ohrid
2. Citizen’s protests against illegal urban plans in Karpos
3. Saving the eco-billboard in Tetovo
4. Citizen’s protests against illegal urban planning chaos in Devar Maalo, Centar
5. The case of the illegal attempt to demolish a private garage to make access for the house of a former minister in Karpos
6. Tetovo illegal wasteland
7. Communal infrastructure and wasteland problems in Skopje, Bitola, Kumanovo, Gevgelija, Tetovo, Ohrid
8. Non-transparent financial work of the local government of Bitola
9. Saving of the public park in Bitola
10. Debar Maalo Citizen’s platform for the local elections 2017
11. The planned budget for support of local sports clubs in the budgets of the new local authorities after the local elections 2017
12. City Council of Skopje issued a ban on delivery stopping for cars and trucks in the period of 7.30 am-6pm
13. An illegal wasteland of diapers near the Strezevo Lake in Bitola
14. Dubious spending of public funds of the authorities in Bitola and Kavadarc
15. Council of Centar issued a moratorium on further building until the complete revision of the urban plans
16. The poor working conditions of the Kumanovo Fire Brigade

Map indicating the Municipalities in which the correspondence network worked on cover stories

Even though the main objective of the project was to challenge the practicing of the accountability on the side of local self-government units, out of the abovementioned, almost each of the stories was extremely successful, if considered from a point of view of initiating change for the better in the society on larger scale. So, the Project’s activities were not only a tool to test the principle of accountability, but also a mechanism to solve problems in the everyday lives of the communities included in this Project. The specific improvements achieved in the communities as a result of the public pressure of each investigative cover story is given in the next section of this Report.
In the period of the Project realization after the local elections, the main topics covered by the local correspondence network were environmental protection issues and their influence on the budgets of the new local authorities. Several disproportions in the budget allocation for environment protection in Municipality of Centar and other Skopje Municipalities (as Skopje has a severe air pollution problem especially in winter) were exposed, and it gained a lot of public reactions and the debate is on the way for changes in the budgets accordingly. The process significantly raise the awareness of the LSGUs for proactive information sharing and responsible governance, which then motivated changes in the practicing of the principle of accountability in several Municipalities.

Accountability observations

The overall objective of the project was raising awareness in LSGUs about the right of access to public information and the need for accountability of institutions, indicated through on-time providing of information upon request of external stakeholders, as well as through raising the quality and the quantity of public information available through official channels of the LSGUs. In that regard, the rest of this Report will provide overview in regards to the expected results and the challenge the SIGMA principle of accountability provided at the beginning of this Project.

According to the good journalistic practices for reliable and relevant news, each news segment was covered by information related to the issues requested from at least two official sources.

During the investigative 16 cover stories, the correspondence network has issues at least 152 requests to official sources, such as to municipal public spokesmen, municipal public relations officers, chiefs of cabinets, presidents of the municipal council, directors of public enterprises and/or to other local self-government authorities. In almost all cases, the official sources were contacted with questions and request for public information through e-mail, fax or phone calls to appointed departments or individuals. Only one request for access to public information was submitted in accordance with the Law on Free Access to Public Information to the Municipality of Bitola, related to the financial work of the local administration. Daily journalism is conducted in fast pace environment, characterized by issues and stories which are relevant if only addressed in the right time frame, thus transparency and responsiveness of the authorities is of outmost importance. By anticipating 16 cover stories that were to be developed and published during the period of only 8 months, the idea of the team was to precisely test and report the circumstances in which free, independent daily journalism is being conducted.

The overall results of the Project show that more than 95 appeals, which is 63% of the requests were answered, and information was provided upon the request of the journalist in a transparent and timely manner. More than 38 appeals, which is 25% of the requests were ignored, with zero response obtained from the LSGUs. The remaining 19 requests or 12% were answered scarcely or reacted to with a general press release, explanation or reaction after the journalistic text was published. This 12 % include the answers which were obtained in a timely manner, but eventually were consisted of incorrect or irrelevant data.
The experience from the field however was very different depending on the story and the municipality which was contacted. Therefore, in certain cases, the journalists had 100% transparency and open communication, while in other cases 100% ignoring, so a qualitative analyses of the above-given data is inevitable and necessary element of the assessment. This Report further provides more detailed insights of the communication process for each story separately:

1. **Illegal hotel building in Lagadin, Ohrid** – The story was developed between 15 June – 14 September, and it was consisted of 10 news segments. The cover story regarding the Illegal hotel in Lagadin, Ohrid is the case in which largest number of official sources were contacted related to the investigated issue. Over 20 requests for information were issued to the Mayor of City of Ohrid, the Municipal Inspectorate in Ohrid, the State Inspectorate for Construction and Urbanization, the Municipal Council of City of Ohrid and TUI tour operator from Netherlands as the only international source. From the local requests, reaction was obtained only from the State Inspectorate for Construction and Urbanization, who went out on the field and issues a demand to stop the construction due to illegal activities. The municipal official did not respond to any of the journalist’s questions. They only responded by issuing general press releases, answering scarcely with information that everything related to the raised issue is in line with relevant legislation. The story provoked citizens’ protest and resulted with a temporary stop of the construction. The story was published locally and nationally and it comprised of several news segments following up on the development of the issue.

2. **Citizen’s protests against illegal urban plans in Karpos** – this cover story was developed between 27 June – 31 August, and it was consisted of 5 news segments. In this case the journalist contacted the municipal officials more than 10 times, demanding a response regarding adopted decisions for new urban plans. Requests for information were sent to the Mayor, the Municipal Council and the local Construction Inspectorate. The requests did not provoke response from the officials, and the appeals were completely ignored. Following a nonresponsive LSGU, the citizens reacted with protest against the illegal urban plans for their neighborhood.

3. **Saving the eco-billboard in Tetovo** – this cover story was developed between 4 July – 12 July, and it was consisted of 3 news segments. In the case of the cover story related to the newly places
eco billboards and their degrading condition, accountability was demanded more than 6 times from the LSGU and the communal public enterprise in Tetovo. The initial response from the consulted officials was obtained in a timely manner, and the explanation was that they are not responsible for the maintenance of the eco billboard. After the story was published, the donor of the eco-billboards also reacted (the German Embassy in Macedonia), and the LSGU and the communal public enterprise took over their responsibility, as it was intended in the first place. In this case, it is an example of a received timely response, but an incorrect one. Should the story not have been published, the eco-billboard would probably be out of order by now. The issues with the eco-billboard was solved, i.e. prevented in the other locations as well, following the cover story for Tetovo.

4. **Citizen’s protests against illegal urban planning chaos in Debar Maalo, Centar** – this cover story was developed between 20 July – 22 August, and it was consisted of 3 news segments. In this case at least 6 appeals for information were directed towards the Mayor of Municipality of Center, and cooperation and openness of the consulted authority was evident, though direct results were slow. Results were delivered after the citizens’ protests. Still, the coverage of this issue resulted in a moratorium of new builds till full revision of the urban plans is complete, which indicates accountability on behalf of the LSGU in question.

5. **The case of the illegal attempt to demolish a private garage to make access for the house of a former minister in Karpos** – this cover story was developed between 13 July – 20 July, and it was consisted of 4 news segments. The story was investigated upon contact from citizens. The Mayor and the LSGU were contacted over 8 times, but there was zero response obtained. The Ombudsman reacted with opening a case on this issue. Due to non-responsive Mayor and LSGU, the citizens organized protest and submitted criminal lawsuit against the Mayor and 5 employees in the Municipality. The case was completed with a court sentence that forbid the Mayor to destroy the garage.

6. **Tetovo illegal wasteland** – this cover story was developed between 19 August – 3 December, and it was consisted of 5 news segments. This story followed up the issue with illegal wasteland in Tetovo that was continuously set on fire. The stories were followed by protest of the citizens as well. The local correspondent requested response over 10 times from the Mayor’s office, the municipal communal department and the local police. Officials were relatively responsive and after the stories were published, mechanization was sent to the area of the illegal wasteland. The story actually uncovered the low capacity of the LSGU to fight against air pollution, because it unveiled that the municipality has only 3 inspectors that are unable to detect all problems on the ground and respond accordingly.

7. **Communal infrastructure and wasteland problems in Skopje, Bitola, Kumanovo, Gevgelija, Tetovo, Ohrid** – this cover story was developed between 27 July – 26 November, and it was consisted of 15 news segments. It is a series of original stories initiated by the local correspondence network, comprising of several news segments published locally and nationally. Each story asked for information from official sources, with total of over 30 appeals sent to LGSUs, state commissions and agencies, Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Transport and Communication, Ministry of Health and Ministry of Environment. In this case, basic contact was maintained in most cases and response from consulted official was available.

8. **Non-transparent financial work of the local government of Bitola** – this cover story was developed between 16 August – 7 December, and it was consisted of 7 news segments. This cover story can obviously be divided into two segments — one developing during the old local government and the other developing during the new local government. In this case, over 14 appeals including direct questions and access to public information was requested in line with the Law on free access to public information. The appeals were sent to the Mayor and the Municipal
Council. Municipality did not respond directly to any of the direct questions. The Municipality responded to the official request providing extremely scarce information, thus inapplicable ones. The second part of the story develops after the change of the local government, when the new authorities proactively exposed the complete financial work, including the wrongdoings of the previous administration.

9. **Saving of a public park in Bitola** – this cover story was developed between 4 September – 6 September, and it was consisted of 3 news segments. The story was initiated as a result of citizens’ protest. The local correspondent followed up on the story and contacted the local authorities more than 6 times, demanding information about adopted plans to destroy the park and build new roundabout on that spot. Requests for information were sent to the Mayor and the local sector for Urban Planning in Municipality of Bitola. The consulted officials were responsive to all appeals, and even though they claimed activities were in accordance with the legislation, their final response was to change the decision and stop the plan to destroy the park and build the roundabout.

10. **Debar Maalo Citizens’ platform for the local elections 2017** – this cover story was developed between 6 September – 13 September, and it was consisted of 3 news segments. The medium gave voice to the citizens’ movement and their platform for the local elections. Requests for information were sent over 6 times to all candidates for Mayors on the upcoming local elections in 15 October 2017, in the City of Skopje and its 10 Municipalities. All candidates were responsive and accepted the platform from the citizens’ movement. It is a historical outcome to incorporate such platform into the election programs of candidates. The next step was to give the members of the civil movement the chairmen position of the municipal council in Municipality of Center, which clearly shows the difference between LSGUs that are closed to the public and authorities that are ready to practice higher level of transparency and good governance.

11. **The planned budget for support of local sports clubs in the budgets of the new local authorities after the local elections 2017** – this cover story was developed between 17 December – 20 December, and it was consisted of 4 news segments. Following a decision of one Municipality to support local sport club with significant amount of money, the media contacted the local authorities over 8 times, demanding information about adopted decision to support the local club. The appeals were sent to the Mayor and the Municipal Council. Officials were transparent and shared information upon request of the journalist. In addition, officials were responsive and reacted positively to the voice of the media and the citizens, by reducing or cutting the budgets spent for this purpose and prioritizing issues accordingly.

12. **City Council of Skopje issued a ban on delivery stopping the cars and trucks in the period of 7.30am - 6pm** – this cover story was developed between 19 December – 26 December, and it was consisted of 2 news segments. This cover story followed the transportation chaos in the central area of Skopje, publishing news segments on the safety and other issues that derive from this. The local officials were contacted on 4 occasions, requesting information about plans to deal this problem. The appeals were sent to the Mayor and the Municipal Council that adopts the decision. The consulted officials were very responsive, and adopted this ban, which significantly resolves this long-years problem of the central city area.

13. **An illegal wasteland of diapers near the Strezevo Lake in Bitola** – this cover story was developed between 5 January – 4 February, 2018 and it was consisted of 3 news segments. This story was initiated by readers, alarming that huge amounts of diapers were dumped near a protected ecological area. The local correspondent followed up on the story with the authorities, contacting on at least 6 occasions. For this purpose, the journalists contacted the Municipal Communal Inspection, the Public Communal Enterprise and the Public Health Center. The reaction of the authorities following the publishing of the story was prompt and the waste was cleaned. Further
The specific conditions, under which the Project activities were taking place were the local election, held 15 October 2018, during which time the local authorities were dissolved and left with no authorization to give access to data.

The general observation is that citizens have developed a habit to react and contact authorities regarding concerning issues, and an awareness to do so. However in most cases until the issue is not exposed in the media, it is ignored.

Following the realization of the Project’s activities, few municipalities instrumentilized the voice of the citizens, opening telephone lines where the citizens can call and report problems, especially related to the pollution. This is evident shift in the behavior and raise of the awareness of the LSGUs regarding the importance of open communication with the citizens. The open lines suggest new level of readiness of the LSGUs to listen to citizens’ appeals and account for their actions and demonstrates willingness to institutionalize this “conversation”. Some of the municipalities that employed such practices are the Municipality of Karposh and Municipality of Aerodrom as well as the City of Skopje.
In the media:


Municipality of Aerodrom announced opening a telephone line for the citizens to be able to report a polluter, and announced extended working time for the environmental inspectors:

http://www.aerodrom.gov.mk/vest/1779

Municipality of Karposh opened a line that can accept calls from the citizens related to pollutors in the Municipality:

http://www.karpos.gov.mk/page/prijavipalenje

The City of Skopje opened a special tab on their web site for citizens’ initiatives, available for the citizens that would like to report a problem on the territory of the city:

http://gragjani.skopje.gov.mk/korisnik/

Such development directly relates to the overall goal of the Project, where the media and public pressure motivated change in the behavior of the local self-government units.

In regards to the communication with the citizens on local level, it can be concluded from the above-mentioned that many cover stories had input from the local community, either through direct reporting of an issue, or through self-organized protests which were backed by the local journalists and the medium. Thus, the project not only gave voice to citizens’ initiatives on local municipal level, but it also created a platform for joint response for more responsible LSGUs in the future. The project teaches the local community regarding their rights to seek accountability, it demonstrates practically the power they hold thus encouraging them to act, which is one of the methods that motivated LSGUs to implement changes and practice transparency. This directly related to the expected results R2 and R4 of this Project, where the developed mechanism of cooperation between local journalists and the local community created a stage and a tool for pressure on the local authorities, creating conditions for more accountable and proactively transparent LSGUs.

In regards to expected result R3, the publicity of the cover stories, the tangible changes some of those brought in the local community as well as the shift in the behavior they inspired in the LSGUs gave courage, motivation and self-esteem to the local correspondents, the citizens, the organizations, but also to the local authorities.
Conclusions and Recommendations

- The project was realized through a sensitive period of the change of local governments. It was a unique opportunity to challenge the LSGUs principle of accountability during a period of change of the local government. The previous local authorities were neither sensitive nor helpful regarding the questions posed by the local reporters about various problems in the municipalities they governed. The new authorities one the other hand, were more open to providing data, especially about the wrongdoings and abuse of office of their predecessors. However, although the practice of being open to public requests of data is changing, there is still reluctance to provide data on time. This indicates that the same legislation and policies, and even the same people working in the institutions, perceive the need for accountability differently under different overall communication strategy. Thus, it can be concluded that more work needs to be done on changing the awareness of the LSGUs and the central government regarding the need for proactive accountability, rather than improving the legislation per se. This is also in line with the main developments recorded in the SIGMA Monitoring Report for Macedonia for 2017 (http://www.sigmaweb.org/publications/Monitoring-Report-2017-the-former-Yugoslav-Republic-of-Macedonia.pdf), concluding that “legal guarantees for access to public information are in place, but their implementation is sometimes hindered by the excessively broad scope of exceptions”.

- Media exposure of problems and requesting accountability from the authorities remains to be the most efficient way for problem solving, which implies low level of proactivity on the side of the LSGUs. The authorities are sensitive to media exposure, and if their first impulse is to obstruct the right to access public information, then creating media pressure helps to slowly realize this right. This is a tool that should not be underestimated in the efforts to improve the accountability, transparency and good governance.

- Some LSGUs are more transparent compared to others, though policies are the same for everyone. Experience from the field indicates that the level of transparency is not related to the administration’s capacities, because the municipalities are rather well staffed in that regard. They have PR responsible, and/or Chief of Cabinets and/or Communication Departments dedicated to providing information for the public. The most determining factor was the awareness for the need to be open with the local community, especially the level of awareness of the Mayor of the Municipality. Depending on the understanding of the obligation and the necessity for transparency and accountability in front of the citizens, some local authorities were more responsive, while others were completely deaf to the voice of their communities. Again, this indicated the urgent need to work together with the local authorities to encourage transparency and accountability for the good of the entire community.
• The Commission for Protection of the Right to Free Access to Public Information in their last available annual report for 2016 inform about significant increase of about 50% in request for public information, compared to the sata from 2015 (http://komspi.mk/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/%D0%93%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%B8%D1%88%D0%B5%D0%BD-%D0%B8%D0%B7%D0%B2%D0%B5%D1%88%D1%82%D0%B0%D1%98-%D0%B7%D0%B0-2016.pdf). They also inform that the access granted in 2016 was 98%, compared to the 95% in 2015. In accordance with the journalistic experience, **important indicators in order to assess the overall accountability and transparency of the institutions are the quality of provided data and timeliness, not only the percentage of granted access to public information.** The experience from the filed indicated that the biggest struggle of the journalists that want to provide reliable and relevant news to the public is the incomplete, irrelevant and/or belated answers of official sources.

• **Further observations** related to the SIGMA principle of accountability which anticipates that “the right to access public information is legally guaranteed and is consistently implemented in practice by the LSGUs” remains to be completed in a period that is not before or immediately after elections.
Annex A

1. Illegal hotel building in Lagadin, Ohrid – 10 news segments:


2. Citizen’s protests against illegal urban plans in Karpos – 5 news segments:


3. Saving the eco-billboard in Tetovo – 3 news segments:


4. Citizen’s protests against illegal urban planning chaos in Debar Maalo, Centar – 3 news segments:


5. The case of the illegal attempt to demolish a private garage to make access for the house of a former minister in Karpos – 4 news segments:


6. Tetovo illegal wasteland – 5 news segments:


7. Communal infrastructure and wasteland problems in Skopje, Bitola, Kumanovo, Gevgelija, Tetovo, Ohrid – 15 news segments:

Also available in Albanian language: https://sdk.mk/index.php/rrjeti-i-korrespondenteve/tere-lagija-kundermon-ere-bagetie-nga-pazari-paligjshem-teuta-arifi-per-kurban-dha-tetovret/


8. Non-transparent financial work of the local government of Bitola – 7 news segments:


9. Saving of the public park in Bitola – 3 news segments:


10. Debar Maalo Citizen’s platform for the local elections 2017 – 3 news segments:


11. The planned budget for support of local sports clubs in the budgets of the new local authorities after the local elections 2017 – 4 news segments:


12. City Council of Skopje issued a ban on delivery stopping for cars and trucks in the period of 7.30 am-6pm – 2 news segments:


Also available in Albanian language: https://sdk.mk/index.php/rrjeti-i-korrespondenteve/qyteti-shkupiti-ndaloj-furnizimin-mall-nga-ora-7-30-deri-ne-ora-18-nga-dhjetori-deri-ne-mars/


13. An illegal wasteland of diapers near the Strezevo Lake in Bitola – 3 news segments:


14. Dubious spending of public funds of the authorities in Bitola and Kavadarci – 3 news segments:


15. Council of Centar issued a moratorium on further building until the complete revision of the urban plans – 4 news segments:


16. The poor working conditions of the Kumanovo Fire Brigade – 2 news segments:
