

Институт за европска политика - Скопје • European Policy Institute - Skopje • Instituti për politikë evropiane - Shkup

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Context

The political and policy environment for our work has experienced tectonic shifts over the last year primarily at the national level in the country, although the regional and European levels were also undergoing change. The new government was finally formed on the 1st of June. Although still in its early days, it has committed to free the institutions, regain the trust of the citizens and bring the country back to its Euro-Atlantic path. Using the prospect of European integration to put wind in its sails, it has to deal with the difficult issues of reforming the judiciary and the public administration, fighting corruption, media reforms and resolving the wiretapping scandal. The tasks ahead are increasingly complex and difficult. The question remains, whether this is too heavy a lift for what is now a relatively weak enlargement process and the tainted record of the European Union in supporting democratisation of the region, especially in recent years. A clear illustration of this questionable role was the refugee/migration crisis of the last couple of years, which shed a new light on the balance of power between the EU and the region under consideration.

The new government has published the reform programme for the first 9 months of their governance in the plan 3-6-9. Through the plan, the government announced that all of the measures take into account the suggestions offered by international stakeholders and relevant nation initiatives (Blueprint initiative). This approach represents a step forward for the government, however, significant efforts will be needed to 'repair' a 'broken system', and in order to be successful, simply ticking boxes based on EU guidance documents and recommendations will not be sufficient, as the reforms must come from within.

The broader picture of the political environment illustrates an opening for much needed progress on the domestic and EU level, but also high risk of box ticking accompanied by shallow Europeanisation and raised expectations that could potentially result in disillusionment. One must keep in mind that experience from the previous enlargement indicates that "negative impacts could also occur notwithstanding the official commitment of Brussels to furthering democratic consolidation."¹ Thus, we recognise that with the change of government in Macedonia there is an opening and a need to support the debate on European issues, accompanied with specific challenges that relate to: managing expectations of accession/enlargement, meaningful discussion and consensus and track-record building on key reforms as well as explaining the intricacies of European integration to the broader public.

¹ PRIDHAM, G. 2005. *Designing democracy: EU enlargement and regime change in post-communist Europe*, London, New York, Palgrave Macmillan.

Organizational development activities

➤ Research quality

In the last year we have focused on improving the internal research capacities through extending the methods used in our research as well as improving our quality assurance processes through our organisational development grant, as well as other ongoing projects.

In relation to advancing our internal research capacities, we have worked with our junior staff in raising their capacity for research from various perspectives in the projects they work on. As announced in our previous report, we have continued to advance the use of interviews and thematic analysis in most of the projects. We remain committed to supporting our staff in developing their research skills and continued specialisation. In the framework of our organisational development grant two members of our research staff attended training on the application of Q methodology organised by our advisory council members prof. Antoaneta Dimitrova and prof. Adam Fagan. The training was organised for our staff as well as members of our TEN partner organisation the Centre for European Policy from Belgrade. The two day training consisted of theoretical background of the project as well as its practical application in reference to the broader study of Europeanisation.

On a broader scale, we have been working towards also introducing new methods in our research and have applied for the first time in Macedonia the deliberative polling method in cooperation with the Centre for Deliberative Democracy at the University of Stanford. With this method we have successfully conducted a representative poll and recruited 160 participants for an event in Skopje for deliberations to review the change in their opinions on the democratic and economic reforms in light of EU accession. As a think tank this method for us provided a way to reach out to and consult the citizens, while at the same time maintaining evidence based approach. The results of the poll show substantive change in the positions of the sample prior and after deliberation highlighting.

In terms of quality control we have advanced the internal and external quality control mechanisms both at the data collection, analysis and writing up phase. The mentoring we received during our RRPP projects from renowned European universities has assisted us in developing these mechanisms. Internally, the research design (including choice of methods and format) is developed by the researcher/research team, and revised/approved by the Research Coordinator/Programme Coordinator, all holders of advanced degrees. The Research Coordinator is tasked to assist the researchers/research teams in all matters related to research design and quality. As a result of the activities for improving research capacity, the practice of developing a specific methodology for any research planned in EPI has already been firmly established and has been employed in the projects *Intersectionality for social protection*, *Dialogues for vision*, *Equitable representation*, *RCC Justice: Governance for growth* *Combating barriers for exit* as well as *Fostering reintegration of Roma returnees*. The same principle has been applied in our regional project WEBER. In addition, we employ peer-review among the employees as a regular practice depending on the familiarity with a specific topic. In this manner, we employ a two-layer internal quality control mechanism. We have employed this approach also through our networks through mentorship or collaboration. The same procedure is applied in the data analysis and writing up stage.

With respect to external quality assurance, we have also used external peer-review in our work. In order to strengthen the external review we have employed several different tracks. We have regularly included peer-review in our project budgets, as was the case in *Combating barriers for exit*, as well as *Network 23+Fostering Roma reintegration*, *RCC Justice: Governance for growth* etc. In this case we have used anonymous peer-review both in the work we publish as well as the one we commission. As to the latter, we have found the mechanism to significantly affect the delivery of the products, but also to advance the quality of our work. With the support of the organisational development grant we have used external peer-review for the 'vetting' of the materials prepared for our deliberative polling project with the support of experts as required by the method used in this project.

For the purposes of feedback, we have increased our presence at international conferences, including the participation at the Association for the study of nationalities at Columbia University in

New York at the beginning of May 2017. The research presented at the conference concerned a theoretical and empirical analysis of the role of EU conditionality in Macedonia during the political crisis of the last two years. EPI's research coordinator held a course at the University of Fribourg on the Western Balkans to the BA and MA students from several Swiss Universities.

Internally, we have increased our capacity for mentoring research, which has also been put in place with the project *Building the next generation of youth leaders* in which EPI mentored young researchers in preparing studies on various youth policies in the country (See annex: list of publications). In the framework of this project, EPI delivered training on research as well as monitoring and evaluation and extensively reviewed the final products of four young researchers/teams of researchers.

The external evaluation on EPI's work revealed that EPI has produced specific research and advocacy products that have had both effect and specific added-value for public institutions and civil society. For example, Network 23, who seeks to encourage public debate, impact on issues in the area of judiciary and fundamental rights (Chapter 23), has become a brand name associated with EPI's work in the area of rule of law. MERC (www.merc.org.mk), a web-based application and data base enabling categorization, cross referencing and elaboration of data related to EU accession of the country in relation to the areas of Chapter 23 has also become one of key resource references on the state of affairs. The same is for IPAdata (<http://ipadata.epi.org.mk/>), a web-based application that provides data on the stat of IPA funds absorption as well as the traffic-light on the status of the Priebe report (part of Network 23 activities).

➤ Communications and advocacy

In the course of the last year, we have placed an increasing focus on the communication and advocacy. Different means to share and communicate our work have been used. These include e-mails, direct contacts via phones, meetings, social media (Facebook, Twitter) also, web platforms (e.g. MERC, IPAdata), visualisation (e.g. Priebe traffic-light) and short documentaries/clips (e.g. *Combatting Barriers for Exit: Macedonian Roma at the Borders*), newsletters (e.g. Network 23 periodic newsletter). Social media and TV appearances have been seen as especially valuable, as it helped with recognition and establishing credibility and expertise. In terms of media statements, we have gradually included junior staff and the communication officer for the purposes of diversification. EPI possesses a wide mailing list of stakeholders, and while it communicates some of its outputs to this list, the communication is targeted and specific, which lies with the nature of the organization working in influencing decision- and policy-making. What is most important, stakeholders, esp. representatives of public institutions (e.g. Ministry of Justice, the Secretariat of European Affairs) and donors recognize not just the high quality of the argumentation, but the fact that EPI is able to present concrete targeted proposals that are implementable, reflecting the experience its staff has from working in public administration.

Intensified cooperation with other national think tanks and other CSOs resulted in second round of a joint initiative for the direction in which the key reform priorities of the new Government should be aimed. The initiative resulted in inclusion of larger number of CSOs and wider scope of key priorities contained in the document named *Blueprint for Urgent Democratic Reforms*. The immediate objective of the document was to contribute towards key reform priorities of the Government in preparation of the Plan 369. 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.

The built cooperation with national institutions was maintained, mainly by their presence on EPI's events and organising joint events with the institutions. Through *Network 23*, EPI managed to be included in the Council for Reform of the Judiciary, preparation of Strategy for the reform of the judiciary, thus advocating and communicating the findings and research of the Network (members and grantees), which resulted in abolition of a law on sanctions but also in inclusion in the national working group on preparation of new law on courts. Embassies have approached EPI as well on organisation of events. Hence, in December 2017 the roundtable on EU foreign policy and regional integration organized by the Embassy of the Republic of Poland in Skopje, in cooperation with the European Policy Institute emphasized the process of reconciliation and drew comparisons with the Western Balkan

region, for which reconciliation and the fostering of positive neighborly relations is also a pertinent theme.

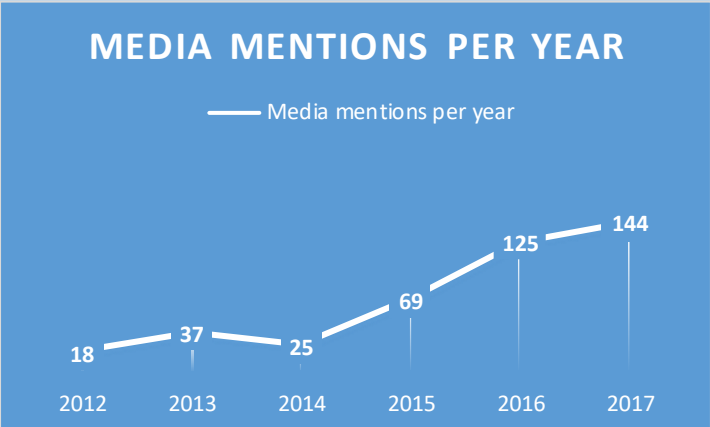
In addition, as originally planned in our organisational development application, we placed increasing focus on outreach in Brussels and EU member states. As to the former, we have organised advocacy trips as part of two of our projects: Combating barriers for exit and Network 23+. As to the engagement with member states we continued our focus on Germany with an advocacy trip at the end of May 2017, as well as participation in the Civil Society Reference Group on Macedonia of the Berghof Foundation over the last two years. In December 2017 we were also a part of the Dialogue Series of the Berghof Foundation in cooperation with the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the EuroAtlantic integration and the name issue at which selected civil society representatives joined key political and decision makers. Our role in terms of research and advocacy has been recognised at the regional level, with EPI getting invitations to various regional initiatives. Such was the case with the WB6 group, in which EPI took part in the establishment of the Western Balkans 6 Advocacy Group (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. Moreover, the cooperation with the *Think for Europe Network* members was intensified under the project for assessing the effectiveness of the EU benchmarking mechanism (BENCHER).

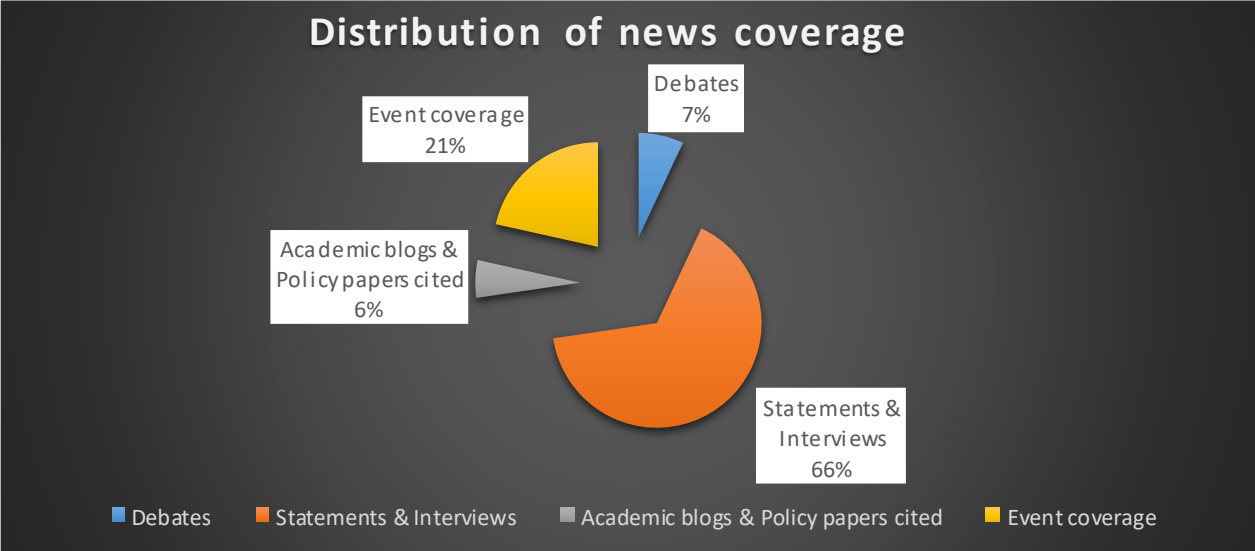
Similarly, we have continued our participation in the outreach events related to the Berlin process in the EU and in the region. We participated as invited speakers at the Reflection Forum of the think tank community held in Trieste prior to the Western Balkans summit and at the policy panel of the Trieste Summit. In Macedonia, for the second year in a row in cooperation between EPI, the Centre International de Formation Européenne (CIFE), the Austro-French Centre for Rapprochement in Europe (CFA/ÖFZ) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs we organised a panel discussion on good neighbourly relations.

In light of the change of national circumstances, we organised our annual conference *Forum Europaeum* on September 29, 2017 four months after the constitution of the new government with participation of the members of our Advisory Council and local stakeholders. The Forum provided a platform for an open and constructive discussion between state stakeholders, experts from foreign and domestic academic community and the non-governmental sector, aimed at utilizing the positive momentum. At the same time, the discussion focused on the EU's commitment to enlargement, the attitude towards the Western Balkans, and especially the announcement by European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker on the (non) enlargement of the Union by 2025. The ultimate goal of the event was to identify common ideas for restarting the Macedonian story, version 2, on the road to the EU. The event gathered more than 150 participants and was one of the very few that managed to get participation from prominent members of Government and opposition.

a) Media mentions

In the reporting period, EPI has made appearance in 172 media articles, out of which, 12 were debates, and 113 appearances were statements to the media or interviews with EPI's team. Additionally, 6 media mentions were academic blogs, 4 were citations of our publications, and 37 news articles were related to our events. Most of the articles were published in national media (163), and 9 articles were published in international media/hubs. For detailed overview please see *Annex 4 - List of published articles*.

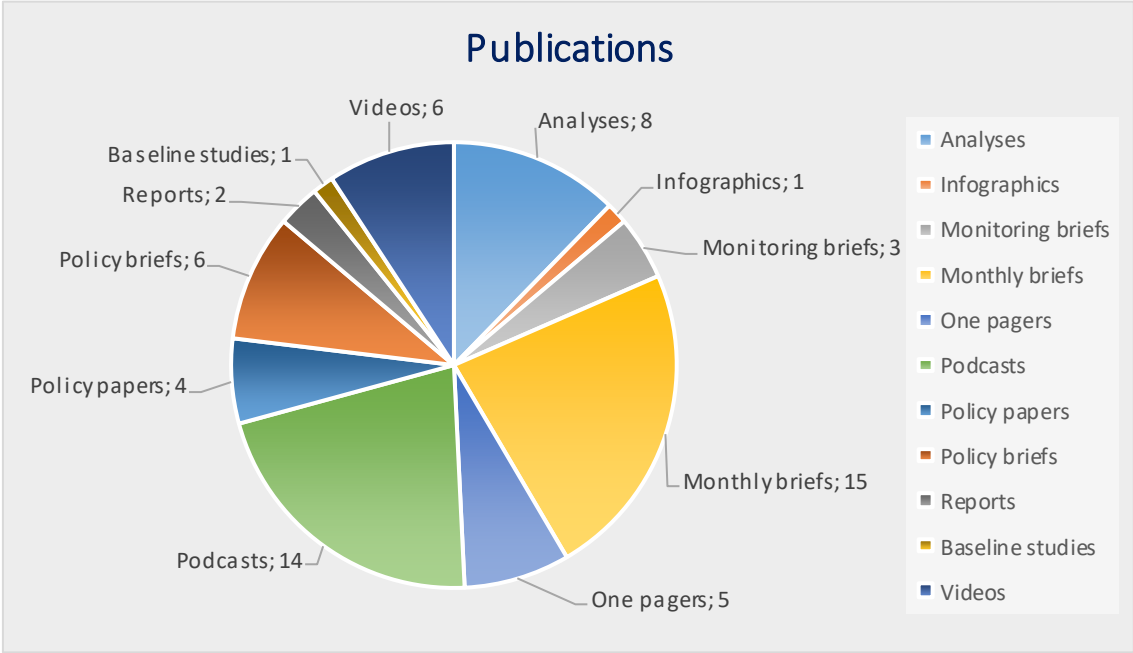




b) Number and type of publications

In 2017, EPI has published 8 analyses, 1 infographic, monitoring briefs, 15 monthly briefs, 5 one pagers, 14 podcasts, 4 policy papers, 6 policy briefs, 2 reports, 1 baseline study, 6 videos.

c) Events



As part of our projects and organisational activities 47 events were organized in the reporting period.

Highlighted

*As a part of the **National EU Debate project**, a deliberative poll was held on 18-19 November 2017, where 150 citizens had the opportunity to exchange opinions with experts and politicians about the positive and negative developments in terms of democracy and economy in light of potential EU accession. Again, politicians from all across the political spectrum (Chairmen of the Assembly of RM Talat Xhaferi, MP Nikola Poposki, MFA Nikola Dimitrov) were responding to the citizens' questions. The deliberations were organized in cooperation with the Centre for Deliberative Democracy from Stanford University.*

***EPI's trademark event Forum Europaeum** was held on 29th of September 2017, gathering experts and politicians from both the government (MoD Radmila Sekerinska) and opposition (MP Nikola Poposki), discussing on "Macedonia's European Integration Story 2.0".*

*In July 2017, an upgraded version of the **Blueprint for Urgent Democratic Reforms** was presented at a press conference, which mapped the most important reforms that need to be addressed in the timeframe of 3, 6, 9 and 12 months. This provided fresh input by CSOs in the reform agenda of the new government.*

A reflection on the Trieste Summit of the Berlin Process was held on 29th of November 2017 in the premises of the MFA, on the topic “The Western Balkan in the European Union: Perspective for good neighbourly relations”. The event was organized by EPI, CIFE, CFA/ÖFZ and the Institute of Strategic Studies of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Multiple workshops and public events were held as a part of the Network 23+ project, most notably workshop on judiciary, communication training and workshop on producing policy papers. A press conference was held, where Network 23 presented the public opinion poll results on Chapter 23.

EPI hosted the third meeting of the WeBER Platform in Skopje on 1-2 November 2017, which gathered CSOs from the region that are working on PAR, experts from ReSPA, RCC, SIGMA/OECD, representatives from national institutions in the WB and journalists. Additionally, few meetings and workshops for the National Working Groups on PAR were held in Macedonia, as well as workshops for researchers in Belgrade and Podgorica, hosted by the members of TEN.

As part of the Combating Barriers for Exit: Roma at the Macedonian Borders, a concluding event was held in February 2017. Also, a roundtable was held for the report on Roma returnees on 10 November 2017, as part of the project Encouraging Sustainable Reintegration of Roma Returnees in Macedonia. The roundtable was attended by the Minister without portfolio for the implementation of the National Strategy for the improvement of the situation of Roma, Deputy Ombudsman of the Republic of Macedonia, CSOs in the area and other relevant stakeholders.

For a complete list of events, please see *Annex 4 – List of events*.

d) Digital traffic and engagement

EPI's Facebook.com/EPI.Skopje page indicates a steady growth and now has 6800 likes. In 2017, the Facebook page indicates an average organic visit rate of 1021 users, compared to 419 views in the previous period. This is number of people who were served any activity from your Page including your posts, posts to your Page by other people, Page like ads, mentions and check-ins.

On Twitter, the @epi_mk account indicates an improved interaction, and now has 722 followers, compared to 516 followers at the start of 2017.

➤ Internal governance and management

EPI experienced a leadership change early in 2017, when the founding director left the position and the Research coordinator was appointed Director. The process of transition of the management went smoothly. The staff accommodated well in the new managing environment and no project activity or internal duty was left due.

In order to assess EPI's staff views on the organization and the new management but also to gather the views of the external stakeholders in this crucial juncture of EPI's development – the change in leadership, an external evaluation was conducted during the period August – October 2017. The ToR included a mix of standard organizational evaluation elements and questions (i.e. mission and its relevance, internal governance) as well as organization-specifics (i.e. quality of products, communication and advocacy), stemming from the fact that this is both the first organizational evaluation EPI has undertaken and that the organization is a think-tank focused on influencing policies and institutions. The evaluation process was based both on desktop research and in-depth face-to-face interviews with 30 selected representatives of media, donors, CSOs and public institutions, EPI bodies, management and one (staff) focus group.

There are three overarching findings that stem out of the evaluation assessment: positive reaction from the stakeholders to the fact that EPI was undertaking an evaluation and the fact that it is an own-commissioned endeavour; coherent feedback between how outside and internal stakeholders assess and view the performance of the organization and the need to engage into strategic thinking and process about EPI's future due to context change and leadership structure change has been univocally expressed by all internal stakeholders.

In terms of its mission, external context and its strategic process, EPI is described as professional, credible, expert, unbiased organization, which was able to adapt in a pragmatic way to the complex political context and donor environment. Its mission is now relevant more than ever. It is its expertise and human capital and the specific circumstance it was established (former public officials working on EU integration issues) that provides for its added-value. Its mission has been clearly and consistently translated into strategic documents, and there is also a clear link between annual plans and reports. EPI has had excellent performance, but with adaptations due to political and donor realities. Still, its main achievements include development into a renowned organization with specific (research and advocacy) brands. Delivery has been very good, but more focus is needed on the communication portfolio. Balance between opportunities and resources are also important as the staff is using its maximum potentials.

In term of product quality, the high quality of the argumentation is present in its analysis, but the fact that EPI is able to present concrete targeted proposals that are implementable, reflecting the experience its staff has from working in public administration is very much appreciated. EPI's products are mostly used as a basic and credible reference and as source of credible shadow information, which is then used directly in policy formulation (e.g. (by-laws) formulation, strategies, implementation of policies) or assessments of the stakeholders. Some of the key products and resources that EPI has developed as part of its projects, could provide for sustainable and easy ways to make available and share the outcomes long after project end. The organization events are rated as high-level and with quality, expert and relevant debate. In terms of communication and advocacy, the organization is known for its concrete and targeted approach.

In terms of governance issues, from its beginning, the organization developed a specific internal check-and-balances structure based on its needs and division of roles foreseen by its founders/members. *Leadership change has been seen as sign of strength, but there is pressure on senior management.* There is a clear recognition of first Director as the leader, due to her seniority, previous work (incl. being a State Advisor) and expertise, but also accompanied with a recognition that she has had an excellent team composed of senior management staff and Programme Coordinators, all of who were also (and still are) founders and members of its Assembly. While the first Director retained the function of (non-voting) member of the Management Board, no stakeholder has expressed concern over EPI's leadership change and transition. In most cases, it was noted that EPI was now an institution and composed of a team of competent people that does not depend on a single person to exist and continue its operations. The organization has *effective written rules, but improved implementation is needed.* *Strong support, mentoring from senior staff is appreciated and junior staff is showing the readiness to be more involved.*

There were changes in the staff during the reporting period. Since the position of the Research coordinator was vacant due to assignment as director, a new researcher Aleksandra Ivanovska has been engaged and has been mentored by the Director and Programme coordinator for acquis and sectorial policies intensively in research and research methodologies. The Programme Coordinator for Democracy and Rule of law, Aleksandar Jovanoski, was on one –year leave, due to admission to Master studies in the Queen Marry University, London, Great Britain and assumed his obligations as of October 2017. The workload of this programme was delegated to the Programme coordinator of acquis and sectorial policies. The researcher Kristina Dimovska left and assumed a post in the cabinet of the Minister of Information Society and Public Administration. This trend of CSO staff leaving to be employed in the administration was criticized by the CSO representatives as harming the image of the CSOs, but this was more emphasised in other CSOs with more of their members leaving for the administration. Having that the researcher position in the CIVICA project “National EU debate” remained vacant, a new researcher Igor Jovanoski was contracted until the end of the project. Several volunteers national and international (France, UK) have been engaged either in short or longer term due to their interest in EPIs work.

Current EPI's staff is the following:

- Simonida Kacarska – Director;
- Ardita Abazi – Imeri – Program Coordinator;
- Aleksandar Jovanoski – Program Coordinator;

- Dejan Ristovski – Financial Officer;
- Vaska Ristovska – Administrative Officer;
- Iva Conevska – Project assistant/researcher;
- Aleksandra Ivanovska - Project assistant/researcher;
- Angel Mojsovski - Project assistant/researcher;
- Ismail Kamberi – Research fellow
- Igor Jovanoski – Project assistant/researcher;
- Darko Malinovski – Communication officer

EPI's director Simonida Kacarska was selected as part of the On Think Tanks Integral Leaders Fellowship. As a fellow, Simonida has been mentored by OTT together with a group of fellows from all over the world for advancing leadership skills while empowering the rest of the organisation. Simonida was also selected as a Marshall Memorial Fellow of the German Marshall Fund of the United States and completed the fellowship in October 2017.

Additionally, attention was paid to acquiring skills training of the younger staff. Communication training was organised for EPI's staff by the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy at the end of April 2017. The Director and the Communication Office of BCSP shared their knowledge and 20 years of experience regarding communication with desired target-groups, stakeholders, providing statements for media and developing of communication strategy. The training took two days within the premises of EPI. Approximately 10 EPI's employees were trained and their training proved successful following EPI's activities after this event. As part of the training, EPI's communication officer worked closely with BCSP in Belgrade during the Belgrade Security Forum and had opportunity to directly gain knowledge on effective communication practices.

In November 2017 a training was organised for EPI staff for identification of qualitative and quantitative indicators in preparation of theory of change and logical frameworks to improve to fundraising efforts in the upcoming period.

In term of document management EPI continued to use DROPBOX business as external storage (Electronic Shared Document Archive), which has proven as a solid tool until now and continued to use Pantheon as a system that should support in financial management and internal control systems. In November 2017 EPI's financial officer was trained for financial management through the PANTHEON software that will help us streamline the financial planning and monitoring of the organisation.

Current research agenda and policy impact

EPI's research agenda is structured in the following programs: Monitoring EU accession, Democracy and Rule of Law, EU acquis and sectoral policies and IPA monitoring. Our research agenda in the reporting period was directed towards all areas with almost all of our projects carrying a significant research component. As was the case in the previous reporting period, due to the political crisis, as will be seen below, our products on Monitoring EU accession and Democracy and Rule of Law largely overlapped.

The policy impact on the Government and Parliament remained limited in the first half of this reporting period as, mostly due to the election campaign period before the end of 2016 and the post-election issues related to forming a Government and constituting the Parliament. Nevertheless, our products remained being a source of information, which was confirmed by the numerous meetings with relevant national and international stakeholders and our external evaluation. In this period, we established a notable partnership with the Association of Judges as the only representative body of the judicial community that has agreed to apply with EPI as a partner in project proposals.

Since the forming of the new government, EPI has been invited and contributed actively to the formulation of the Government plan 3-6-9, input for the Government programme as well as meetings of parliamentary bodies including the National Council for European Integration. Our most visible engagement has been linked to two topics: the input for the Strategy for reform of the judiciary and the Public Administration Reform Strategy. As to the former, EPI has been invited as the only CSO to participate in the work on the new Law on courts.

EPI continued to participate in the drafting of the new Strategy for Public Administration Reform (PAR). In that respect, an EPI representative attended the three-day workshop organized by the Ministry of Information Society and Administration on finalizing the strategy and drafting an Action Plan for the PAR Strategy. We also continued to participate in the consultative process initiated by a number of CSOs regarding the Blueprint, in order to provide policy proposals to the arising issues related to resolving the political crisis.

Findings from our projects continued to be presented to relevant national stakeholders, to the Delegation of the European Union to Skopje, as well as in front of relevant international stakeholders through various international conferences.

Network 23+ (EU Delegation, Civil society Facility, 2016-2017)

In the first year of the Project, the focus was on the implementation of the re-granting scheme and capacity raising activities for the grantees. Nine grants were delivered in a transparent manner and the implementation of the re-granting projects is progressing as planned. The mentorship system was further developed, allowing for a transfer of know-how within the CSOs members of the Network and the grantees. These activities resulted in strengthened capacity of the grantees for monitoring and evaluation of policies in Chapter 23. During the second year of implementation, EPI placed focus on the finalization of the products of the grantees but also reached out to institutions and advocated the findings of the policy products. In March 2017, a workshop for writing a policy studies was organized to improve the skills of the grantees in finalizing their products. All re-granted organizations presented their policy products and were widely disseminated to all relevant stakeholders.

The Network 23+ has expanded beyond the original membership of Network23 (from 9 CSOs in 2015 to 15 CSOs in 2017) and the number of organizations that show interest to join the Network is increasing. Members assess the Network's value as generally highest for influencing the policy agenda and increasing CSO understands about areas of chapter 23. Almost to the same degree, other functions of the Network such as building relationships and exchanging knowledge, strengthening research and advocacy capacities of CSOs remain valued by CSO members.

At the policy table, the Network's influence is acknowledged by the national and EU institutions mostly through the Shadow report and the monthly briefs, as a core instructive function for monitoring and evaluating the policies. The structured monitoring in line with a consistent methodology

has resulted in publication of monthly monitoring briefs, as well as the preparation of the Shadow report on Chapter 23 for the period May 2016 – January 2018. Monthly briefs are widely disseminated and are already recognised as a relevant source for the state of affairs in Chapter 23 in the Republic of Macedonia. The core products of the Network have also attracted high interest of the media, making the Network a hub for opinions related to areas covered by chapter 23. The Network database MERC has proven as an important tool for information exchange, and it engages member CSOs more deeply than that, e.g. inviting CSOs to feed the database with their researches or providing them a resource base for research, as well as activities of the CSOs. In addition, its update, which included infograms on the implementation of the Urgent reform priorities contributed to its visibility. In addition this has resulted in inclusion of Network 23+ in the Council for the reform of judiciary and consultations on preparation of the Strategy for the Reform of the judiciary.

For the CSOs, Network23+ “brand” gives Network members credibility especially in communication with institutions. Representatives of Network are invited to and have meetings with key institutions (SEA, MFA, MJ, Courts, Judicial Council, Judicial Administration, Academy of Judges and Public Prosecutors, Parliament to name a few) to present its new findings. The EU institutions have acknowledged the contribution by taking into account the findings presented in main products of the Network (show report, monthly briefs) and including them in the EC Country report. This is owed to the advocacy activities of the Network before EU institutions (EUD in Skopje, relevant DGs in the EC and EP). The analysis “The effects of the application of the Law on deciding and determining the amount of the penalty in the case law of the Basic Courts in Bitola, Veles, Kocani, Kavadarci” was used by the Constitutional Court for abolition of the law. European Policy Institute participates in a working group for preparation of amendments on Law on courts and Law on Judicial Council. The findings of the policy products of the Network are used in this regard.

During the reporting period exchange of views and know-how with the associates from the region was provided through the regional workshop and four peer-exchange visit proved as beneficial in this regard. Two expert workshops on judiciary and fundamental rights were conducted. The judiciary expert workshop was conducted in cooperation with the Academy of judges and public prosecutors and some members of Network 23 (Coalition all for fair trails, European Policy Institute and Helsinki Committee of The Republic of Macedonia). The topic of the workshop was “Monitoring of court cases”. The expert workshop on fundamental rights on topic “legal obligations of the Ombudsman and reality” was conducted in November with cooperation with the Ombudsman of the Republic of Macedonia. The policy dialogue on judiciary was conducted in cooperation with the Association of judges and legislative proposal for improving the court transparency was prepared in this regard. This is the first time that the Association of Judges cooperated with CSOs and showed readiness to actively cooperate with the Network 23+.

Western Balkans Enabling Project for Civil Society Monitoring of Public Administration Reform (WEBER) – IPA Regional Society Facility (December 2015- December 2018)

During the reporting period the development of the methodology for the PAR monitor and building strong partnerships with the stakeholders continued. The core of the monitoring work on the WEBER project took place and the findings are currently communicated with the responsible institutions. EPI designed of the grant scheme for re-granting for 30 organizations throughout the region (all six Western Balkan Countries). The call lasted two months (15 January – 15 March) and resulted in 33 grants in all WB countries. The grants implementation is going smoothly due to the strong role and coordination of the Grant manager from EPI. The grant manager designer monitoring and evaluation documents as well and in close cooperation with Project officers in each country are responsible for oversight of grants implementation.

EPI on this topic has coordinated the chapter on the public administration reform in the **Blueprint for democratic reforms 2.0** enabling us to work on this issue from various perspectives and also to target a variety of stakeholders. EPI has been included in the consultation for PAR in preparation of the national reform Plan 3-6-9 and also in the preparation of the Strategy for public administration reform.

Benchmarking for EU reform – how effective? BENCHER - EFB & OSF(January 2017-August 2018)

The project explores the effectiveness of the EU benchmarking mechanism for the Western Balkans. Its overall objective is to contribute to improve the benchmarking mechanism as an impetus for EU related reform in the Western Balkan countries. In this project EPI as a lead with the partners of the TEN network has conducted a comparative analysis of the 2016 Progress Reports in line with our in-house methodology and has provided an overview of developments in 2017 with respect to the political criteria. In addition, all of the project partners are conducting an analysis of selected benchmarks of the EU as to their effectiveness with the aim of providing concrete proposals for their advancement. The project will conclude by mid next year with advocacy visits in all of the countries of the region, in addition to Brussels, the Hague and Berlin as key EU member states' capitals engaged in the benchmarking mechanism.

Combating barriers for exit: Macedonian Roma at the borders – TTF RIO (December 2015-March 2017)

In this project we studied (un)intended consequences of the visa liberalisation process as an element of Europeanization in relation to the limitations of free movement of Roma. The project was focused on the research activities that contribute to the understanding of the problem of Roma migration and exit refusals in the aftermath of the visa liberalization through preparation of the following documents: methodological guidelines, baseline study, focus groups, media analysis and analysis of court cases (see below for details). All of them were under internal and/or external peer review and are available on the EPI's webpage² and EPI's resource database³ under the tag "Roma" and "Visa liberalization". Second, we prepared and distributed a guide for victims of discrimination upon exit and a policy brief with recommendations. Last, we have implemented advocacy activities to the national Ombudsman, MoI and MLSP as well as EU institutions and research institutes in Brussels. Our policy recommendations were tested at a round table with the Border police and advocated for at the national and local level with extensive outreach including through TV appearances, blogging and social media, including op-eds, infographs and video stories. The direct contact with the Ministry of Interior has bred results in the sense that the practice we were aiming to combat has been discontinued (in addition to our policy pressure, among other reasons due to the lowering of pressure from the European Union member states). Yet, one must keep in mind that this policy issue must be kept on the agenda first, due to the need to also support still plaintiffs in ongoing court procedures and second, due to the likelihood of this practice to repeat in the future should pressure from the EU member states rise.

Fostering sustainable reintegration of Roma returnees in Macedonia – TTF RIO (January 2017– March 2018)

The project "Fostering sustainable reintegration of Roma returnees in Macedonia" is a partnership between EPI and the Roma NGO KHAM from Delcevo, Macedonia. Mapping of existing services and measures for reintegration on local and central level was made. The mapping combined the existing Government programs in the most critical areas, health protection, housing, employment, social protection and education and the Program for support for reintegration of returnees. For better implementation of the project, a call for Local Associates was designed and published where five associates in the proposed municipalities, Shuto Orizari, Tetovo, Bitola, Kumanovo and Delcevo were selected in order to serve as a link between the returnees and local institutions. The associates have mapped over 50 families in the five municipalities and have selected 5 persons from the most vulnerable families from each municipality. The selected persons have started attending vocational trainings tailored according to their needs. A study of reintegration of Roma returnees in Macedonia has been completed on the basis of extensive interviewing and focus groups. The team of experts additionally delivered a Manual for Returnees on how to exercise their rights in the area of acquiring personal documents, social protection, education employment, housing and healthcare. The Manual attracted

² <http://epi.org.mk/publications.php>

³ goo.gl/FuimBx

great attention having reached 15740 people on social media and was shared among Roma individuals working in the public institutions and NGOs.

Drafts of both documents were discussed at a round table held on 10th of November in front of a broad audience of stakeholders, among them the Minister without Portfolio for the implementation of the National Strategy for the improvement of the situation of Roma, the Deputy Ombudsman, representatives from the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, the Director of the Directorate for Development and Promotion of Education of the languages of the minorities, representatives from local employment agencies, representatives from schools and representatives from Roma civic organizations and from the Roma Information Centres (RIC). Additionally, the Roma fellow developed policy proposal on registration of the returnees. The products developed within the project are published and electronically disseminated to all the involved stakeholders and afterwards, advocacy meetings are planned to take place within the first month of 2018.

Raising capacities and advocacy potential towards more substantive involvement of CSOs of V4 and WB6 – International Visegrad Fund (February 2017 – February 2018)

The project supported with the International Visegrad Fund builds upon the CEPS project (See above) and supports the transfer of know how within the TEN Network members in partnership with the Visegrad countries. The project is focused on advancing the policy making systems in the WB.

IPA Monitoring Programme

The web platform for IPA Monitoring Programme is currently under maintained due to upgrade of the tools for matching the new IPA 2 system. It is expected the platform to go online within next year together with the new design and tools. With the platform going online, its promotion on the social media and EPI's webpage will be ensured.

Building the next generation of youth leaders - CIPE (July 2016 - October 2017)

EPI in cooperation with the Youth Educational Forum implemented the project “Building the next generation of youth leaders”. The project strived 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. Thus, the aim of the project was to implement a comprehensive leadership program to build a new generation of young entrepreneurs and civic leaders. As a project partner, EPI supported youth fellows in investigating the institutional factors contributing to youth unemployment and exclusion from the policymaking process. The fellows were assigned with mentors who have expertise in the field and received trainings on research methods, writing, and presentation and communication skills. The research products were presented at a high level roundtable with participation of policy makers. Their findings were incorporated in a publication composed of three studies targeting different topics: the implementation of student internships; youth unemployment; and youth ‘brain drain’. The youth fellows presented their findings through a stakeholder roundtable and were further promoted through media.

National EU debate - CIVICA Mobilitas (July 2016 - December 2017)

The project *National EU Debate* addressed the absence of a national debate for the European Union, aiming at initiating an inclusive dialogue with a broad range of stakeholders for the accession process of Macedonia in the EU. In fulfilling the project goals an innovative method of ‘deliberative polling’ was adopted, developed by Professor James Fishkin from the Centre for Deliberative Democracy (CDD) at Stanford University. During the entire reporting period, the project team held regular consultations with representatives from the CDD for maximizing the benefits of the deliberative polling method. Based on the findings from the desk analysis on existing surveys of citizens’ perceptions about the EU integration process of Macedonia, an expert focus group and in house brainstorming the project team identified the key topics for deliberation related to the democratic and economic transformation in view of EU accession. The topics were incorporated in the survey questionnaire and the briefing materials prepared for the deliberative event. The initial poll was conducted on a sample 1200 citizens and represented the eighty regions form the country. Following this, a national deliberative poll was held on 17/18 November 2017 with more than 160 citizens

participants who discussed democratic and economic reforms in the country on its path to the EU. They also prepared direct questions for the panels on democracy and economy and interacted directly with high ranking officials (the President of the Parliament Thalat Xhaferi, MFA Nikola Dimitrov, MP Nikola Poposki). Following this, another survey was conducted with the participants using the same questionnaire. The results showed major changes in citizens' perceptions regarding the national EU integration process. Obviously, they see the EU in the light of country's further democratisation and economic development.

In general, more than 60 % of the citizens strongly support the EU membership while almost 70% think that the membership will improve the rule of law, judiciary, administration and media in the country. In economic terms, again, 60% think the EU membership will improve the living standards in the country bringing new investments, better education and social protection. In sum, the project was successful in bringing citizens, experts and politicians together and creating a healthy and democratic EU public debate.

Joint action for urgent reforms in judiciary – FOOM (July 2017 – June 2018)

In July 2017 EPI started with implementation of the project “Joint action for urgent reforms in judiciary”, together with Institute for Human Rights and Macedonian Young Lawyers Association. The overall goal of the project is to enhance the transparency, accountability and professionalism of the judicial bodies. The project is designed to provide structured monitoring of the implementation of the Urgent Reform Priorities in the area of judiciary. EPI role in the project is to provide structured monitoring of two priorities related to the training of judges and prosecutors and the publication of court rulings. First monitoring brief for the status of the implementation of the Urgent Reform Priorities in the area of judiciary was presented on 21 of November 2017 in Hotel Arka – Skopje.

Other activities

Upon request of the Secretariat for European Affairs, EPI has prepared a document summing up the recommendations and concrete measures of the conducted researches related to IPA reforms as an input to the Secretariat's IPA Master Plan.

Future plans and challenges

2017 was a year of tectonic changes for EPI both in the external environment and in the internal work of the organisation. The standard of research and communication was maintained under high pressure on the staff. In addition, due to the expertise of the staff and recognition of its work international organisations have approached EPI to conduct research and/or data systematisation for their needs. In addition, the institutions have approached EPI in various working groups for policy reforms creating expectations and demands upon the organisation. The organisation is in front of the challenge of meeting these needs and expectations coupled with fundraising efforts.

At the same time, there is increasing for both supporting middle management as well as a need for mentoring of the researchers both as a result of the transition of management, but also due to the increasing demands on the organisation. Hence, our future plans concern advancement of our mentoring system and further advancing quality assurance and control in the organisation especially in light of our application for the Bridging initiative of the OSI. In terms of fundraising 2018 will be an intensive year in which we aim to submit applications to further support our work on the Network 23 but also the overall accession process in relation to democracy and rule of law. The project we have submitted in partnership with the Helsinki Committee and the Association of judges for further support in the area of chapter 23 (value: 500 000 EUR) has been placed on a reserve list for funding. Overall, the main challenge for the organisation in 2018 is fundraising in light of the concluding of the organisational development support and our ongoing fundraising efforts to ensure co-financing of Network 23.

In terms of specific projects in relation to our programme Monitoring EU accession we will continue with our BENCHER project until early March. As a follow up to this activity we have submitted an application to the European Fund for the Balkans focused on improving the benchmarking mechanism in the new Enlargement strategy and 2018 reports in partnership with the TEN network. On a similar note, we're preparing an application with the TEN network for the Bridging initiative of the OSF. Similarly, we will continue our work on the WeBER project focused on the reform of public administration. In relation to our programme on Democracy and rule of law, the project Network 23 will continue until mid 2018 and will be complemented by a regulatory impact assessment on the Law on courts as a new project starting February 2018. The Urgent Reform Priorities will continue to be monitored as part of the abovementioned project. In this vein, we will continue our work on reintegration of returnees in Macedonia focusing on Roma and non-Roma through our OSI project, GIZ support and pending negotiations with the World Bank for a consultancy project on this topic. In partnership with the European Movement in Serbia as a leader of a regional consortium we have started implementing a project devoted to an assessment of the SAA and CEFTA on Macedonia which will run in the course of 2018. In order to revitalise our IPA program we have submitted a small grant application for assessing the needs of the municipalities in Skopje for the use of IPA funds. Last, together with the WB6 group we have submitted an application to the Western Balkans Fund for continuing the advocacy activities of the group.

Annexes to the report

1. List of projects implemented or under implementation
2. List of significant policy products printed/published online in the reporting period
3. List of significant events
4. List of published articles