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ANTI-CORRUPTION NEWSLETTER

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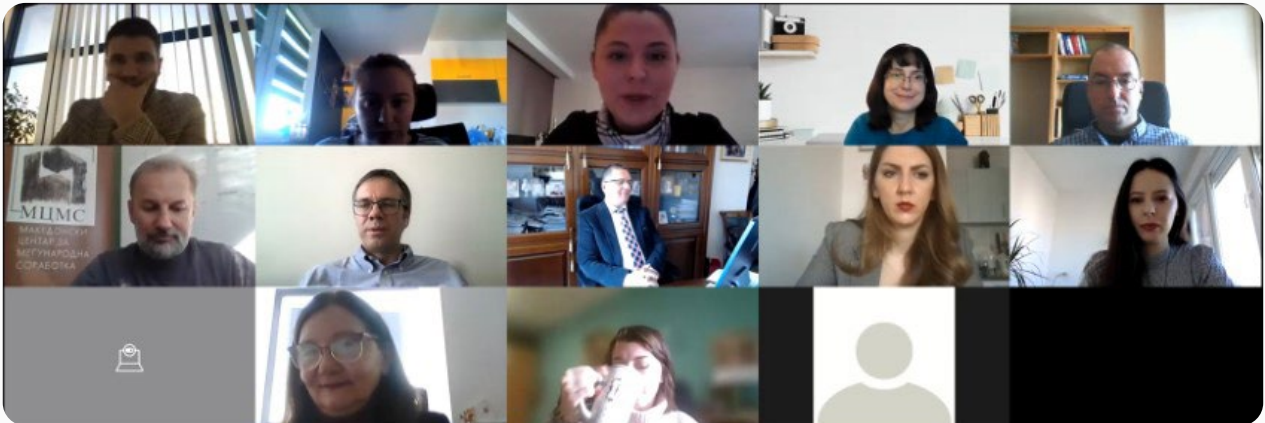


**NEWS BY
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THE SELDI NETWORK CONTINUES WITH PREVENTION AND ANTI-CORRUPTION ACTIVITIES

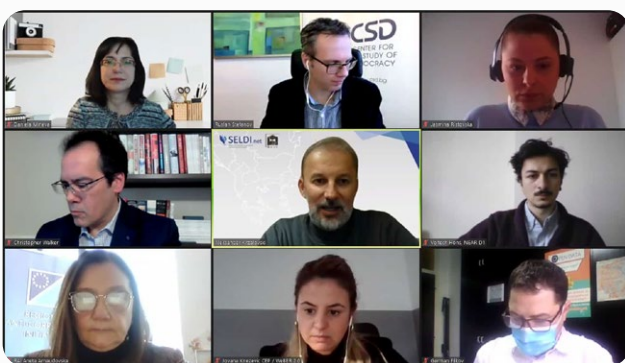
On 10 February 2021, SELDI held its fourth annual coordination meeting within the project “Civil Society for Good Governance and Anti-Corruption in Southeast Europe: Capacity Building for Monitoring, Advocacy and Public Awareness”. MCIC director Aleksandar Krzalovski remarked that the project still has a number of activities that will contribute to the prevention and fight against corruption in the Western Balkans, while Ruslan Stefanov, Knowledge and Outreach Coordinator, SELDI and Program Director at the Center for Study of Democracy, Bulgaria, pointed out SELDI’s capacity to influence anti-corruption policies in the region and suggested to focus on advocacy and strengthen cooperation with stakeholders.



In the next period, the project activities are focused on holding national and regional events for sharing the results of the Corruption Monitoring System, a workshop for lessons learned and network sustainability, the preparation of the second Regional Anti-Corruption Report and three policy briefs, as well as organizing an annual regional anti-corruption forum as the final event.

MCIC, 11.02.2022

FOSTERING SUSTAINABLE CIVIL SOCIETY COOPERATION FOR GOOD GOVERNANCE IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE: WHAT’S NEXT?



In order to address CSOs’ challenges in Southeast Europe, the SELDI initiative organized an online webinar on 18 January 2022 with experts and CSO representatives, including Chris Walker, Vice President for Studies and Analysis at the International Forum for Democratic Studies, National Endowment for Democracy, and Vojtech Hons, Project Manager, Directorate-General for European Neighbourhood Policy and enlargement negotiations in the European Commission. The debate focused on

the best cooperation methods to increase CSOs impact on anti-corruption, good governance and the rule of law, identifying effective CSO-country cooperation mechanisms that could be shared, also addressing the exploitation of misinformation and digital revolution to hinder democratic governance. CSOs and investigative journalists networks have a crucial role in deeply monitoring and analysing the complex challenges of governance, and should approach policy makers as a coalition, impacting advocacy without specifically targeting governments. **MCIC, 20.01.2022**

ILLEGAL AND LIFE-THREATENING CONSTRUCTION IN SARAJEVO HAS TO STOP



The informal group of citizens “Zgrada” held a press conference to inform about the irregularities committed in the case of illegal construction in the municipality of Stari Grad in Sarajevo. The group showed there was a lack of transparency in changing the regulation plan, in not informing the citizens about the Municipality decision of their complaint, and in not adopting the regulatory plan and land parceling procedures prescribed by the Law on Physical Planning of Sarajevo Canton, endangering the citizens’ properties and lives. Tenants from Maguda Street 3 in the Alifakovac settlement repeatedly pointed out the non-transparent and illegal actions for the regulation plan and land parceling in this settlement, which endangers properties, protected facilities and the lives of citizens. Despite being a 1903 state-protected building, the municipal administration officials changed the zoning plan and sold the plot to build a building on this site, representing just one of many cases of illegal construction in the municipality of Stari Grad. **CCI, 31.01.2022**

“SUPPORT TO CITIZENS IN THE FIGHT AGAINST CORRUPTION” NEWSLETTER



The project “Support to Citizens in the Fight against corruption” has published a new issue of the newsletter that offers an overview of current events in the fight against corruption of informal civic groups and organizations in local communities.

CCI, 21.01.2022

MP VIOLATES THE LAW ON PREVENTION OF CORRUPTION IN MONTENEGRO

In the repeated procedure ordered by the Administrative Court, the Agency for the Prevention of Corruption issued a new decision and found that the current member of the Parliament of Montenegro and former Minister of Defence Predrag Boskovic, violated Article 12 paragraph 5 of the Law on Prevention of Corruption. This was due to almost EUR 50,000 earned as Vice President of the Executive Board of the European Handball Federation in 2017 and 2018, and as a member of the Board of the World Handball Federation in 2018. This case was initiated in 2018 by the Institute of Alternatives, as Article 12 of the Law on Prevention of Corruption stipulates that a public official may be the president or member of a governing and supervisory body, including sports associations, but cannot generate revenue or other compensation on that basis. **IA, 11.02.2022**

CITIZENS OF KREŠEVO ON THE STREETS AGAIN - DEMAND COMPLIANCE WITH LEGAL PROCEDURES AND PUBLIC HEARING



Citizens of Kreševo, who have been fighting against the illegal work of quarries and lime kilns for years, took to the streets of Kreševo, more precisely in Bjelovići, to send a clear message to the Federal Ministry of Environment and Tourism to comply with the new environmental permit for the lime factory and hold a public hearing, in the presence of all interested citizens.

For BFS d.o.o. (lime factory), the environmental permit expires on February 20, and they sent a request to the FBiH Ministry of Environment and Tourism to renew the environmental permit. It is interesting that on the day of the citizens' protest, the lime kiln is not working and the workers were sent home, and the day before it was working quite normally. Although representatives of BFS d.o.o. claim that everything is according to the law and that they work in accordance with the permits, the citizens are wondering, if that is really the case, why is the lime kiln always shut down when activists and the media come.

Forty gathered locals sent a message that they cannot live from the dust emitted by limestone, using illegal fuels, that their children's health is endangered, and that young people are constantly moving out. They are asking the authorities to finally react.

This is not the first time that the citizens of Kreševo have protested against the improper work of quarries and lime kilns, but after an earlier protest, BFS d.o.o., as a form of intimidation of citizens, initiated misdemeanor proceedings against the locals who blocked the road. So instead of the owner and management of a company that works illegally and pollutes the environment and poisons people, there are citizens in court who are fighting for their rights and the functioning of the rule of law. **CCI, 20.02.2022**

CSOS AND THE MEDIA CONTRIBUTE TO PROGRESS AND REFORM IN SOCIETY

The Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Northern Macedonia, on 10 February 2022, held a consultative meeting with civil society organizations on the upcoming Call for Project Proposals under the IPA III Instrument for Support of Civil Society and Media 2021-2022. Stephen Hudolin, Head of Cooperation at the Delegation of the European Union (DEU), emphasized the importance of working with the civil society sector as a vital decision-making partner in fostering the transformation of society, with CSOs and media proactively acting as a partner of the Government. Irena Ivanova, responsible for civil society at DEU, presented the consultation process and the upcoming call for project proposals framework, focusing on the development of civil society, youth, gender, environment, social inclusion and other important areas, as well as on improving the visibility of CSOs work and their relationship with citizens. The upcoming call for project proposals should reflect the EU's new strategic approach of the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA III) program and the Western Balkans Economic and Investment Plan (EIP) 2020, identifying key policy areas to advance socio-economic development, ensure the long-term recovery of the region and move forward on the EU path, while supporting involvement of CSOs participatory democracy in the country. **MCIC, 11.02.2022**

CORRUPTION IN 2030: STRATEGIC FORESIGHT WITH ANTI-CORRUPTION INSTITUTIONS



Institute for Democracy “Societas Civilis” - Skopje organized a strategic planning workshop with institutions involved in the fight against corruption. This workshop is part of the process for long-term strategic planning. The process includes an overview of existing strategies and procedures for combating corruption in institutions, essential social processes, factors, and actors that will influence the fight against corruption by 2030. The workshop is attended by representatives of the Inspection Council, State Audit Office, Commission for Protection of Competition, State Commission for Prevention of Corruption, Energy Regulatory Commission, Customs Administration, Financial Police Office, and Public Revenue Office. This is one of several workshops planned under the “Fostering Public Debate on Accountability” project. Institute for Democracy will work with anti-corruption institutions and civil society to create plans and address the challenges facing the future of the fight against corruption. **IDSCS, January 2022**

ANTI-CORRUPTION NEWS FROM THE SEE REGION

The current section of the Newsletter presents a summary of the latest anti-corruption news from the SEE region, based on consolidated information from multiple sources, such as media outlets and narratives received by the SELDI project partners.

THE BLACKLIST OF MAYORS AND PRESIDENTS FAILING ON LOCAL ANTI-CORRUPTION PLANS

According to the data of the Anti-Corruption Agency, only 29 municipalities out of 145 local self-governments have adopted the local Anti-Corruption Plan and formed a body that should monitor its implementation. The remaining municipalities have either not adopted the Plan or formed the monitoring body, or both. Besides technical deficiencies, the problem in these local governments is the lack of will and refusal of some local officials to make changes, such as positioning people from the party or government bodies into local anti-corruption authorities, thus going against the prescribed rules.

Yet, the envisaged system now offers a solid mechanism, a precise procedure with clear criteria whose implementation is crucial to close Chapter 23 and make progress toward the EU accession. To improve this process, the Bureau for Social Research (BIRODI) made a Blacklist, which includes mayors and presidents of municipalities who did not fulfil this obligation and will be forwarded to international organizations to put more pressure. **Danas, 14.01.2022**

WILL THE CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGES BRING SERBIA CLOSER TO THE EU?

On 16 January the citizens of Serbia approved the constitutional changes, one of the most significant being the abolishment of the competences of the National Assembly during the election of judges and prosecutors, which reduces the possibilities for exercising direct political influence on them.

Srđan Majstorović, Chairman of the Governing Board at the European Policy Center (CEP) and member of the Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG), explained that the change of the Constitution represents the formal fulfilment of one of the fifty interim benchmarks from the Action Plan for Chapter 23, however it is unrealistic to expect that this step will accelerate the process of Serbia's accession to the EU. Serbia is still at the beginning of its judicial reform, and the impact of these constitutional changes on the EU integration will mostly depend on the political will after the parliamentary elections in April. **European Western Balkans, 21.01.2022**

SERBIA WORSENEDED ITS CORRUPTION PERCEPTION INDEX RANKING

In 2021, Serbia ranks 96th out of a total of 180 countries, along with Argentina, Brazil, Indonesia, Lesotho and Turkey, and two places down from the previous year. Serbia did not make progress in the field of corruption in the public sector in 2021, recording 38 points as in 2020. In the region, only Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina are ranked lower than Serbia, which is far behind both the European and European Union average, 57 and 64 respectively, and reached its worst position in the last 10 years. During the results presentation at the online conference "Presentation of the most important global ranking of countries by corruption perception - CPI 2021: Where is Serbia on the list?", the experts pointed out the lack of political will in implementing and applying the law as the main problem in the field of Serbian anti-corruption. **European Western Balkans, 25.01.2022**

CORRUPTION IS THE BIGGEST PROBLEM IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

According to Gabriel Escobar, the U.S. Special Envoy for the Western Balkans, corruption is the biggest problem in the Western Balkans, which eventually erodes citizens trust in democracy, hinders innovation and creativity, and endangers already scarce budgets. Besides frightening investors, widespread corruption is causing young people to leave the region, as the Western Balkans do not offer them enough opportunities. Escobar remarked the commitment of the U.S. in promoting accountability, using all the available tools and sanctions to punish destabilizing actors. **Libertas, 01.02.2022**

EIGHT OPPOSITION PARTIES PLEDGED TO PUSH FOR SERBIA'S EU MEMBERSHIP

At the initiative of public figures gathered around the Appeal for Responsibility, representatives of eight opposition parties signed the Agreement for Responsible Serbia, in which they pledge to advocate for Serbia's membership in the EU. The agreement states that the parties and coalitions "clearly, publicly and without alternative declare their commitment to Serbia's membership in the European Union, as the most important political, economic and cultural partner of modern Serbia." As for the elections, the representatives of the opposition undertook to not attack each other in the campaign and to cooperate in the election process. In addition, the opposition parties will not form coalitions with the representatives of the current government, enabling the independent work of the judiciary and the media and stopping projects that endanger the environment. In the eventual second round of elections, the parties will support the opposition candidate, which in case of victory will be chosen for Prime Minister and Mayor of Belgrade from the list with higher results. According to H1, the agreements were not signed by the representatives of the People's Party, the only party who did not respond to their invitation. **European Western Balkans, 17.02.2022**

SERBIA REMAINS IN THE "INCOMPLETE DEMOCRACIES" CATEGORY

According to the "Economist" Democracy Index for 2021, Serbia remains in the category of "incomplete democracies", despite the small improvement from last year achieved in the government functioning area. As discussed in the Democracy Index report, there is a continuing negative impact of the pandemic on worldwide democracy and freedom. In fact, the pandemic has resulted in the withdrawal of civil liberties, even among developed democracies but also in authoritarian regimes. In the Southeast European region, thus including Serbia, democratic mechanisms coexist with the poor functioning of governments, while corruption, lack of transparency and poor behaviour of citizens in government are common characteristics of almost all countries. The report states that the level of trust in governments has increased in several countries in the Western Balkans, and the biggest improvements in the quality of democracy in the region have been received by Montenegro and Northern Macedonia, now classified as "incomplete democracies".

According to the Economist's index, less than half of the world's population lives in some kind of democracy and only 6.4% live in "full democracies", while more than a third of the world's population lives under authoritarian rule. **European Western Balkans, 10.02.2022**

KOSOVO'S CHALLENGES ON THE JOURNEY TOWARDS THE EU

Supported by the Dutch Embassy in Kosovo, the FOL Movement organized in collaboration with PIPS a one-day conference on "Kosovo's journey to the EU: Challenges in Justice, Public Administration and European Integration" to discuss on the efforts made by Kosovo in implementing reforms in these particular fields. The Dutch Ambassador in Kosovo Carin Lobbezoo pointed out the importance of this meetings, as they help to better understand the reforms and legislation implemented, and how they could be improved to bring Kosovo closer to the EU. The meeting discussed the reform of Public Administration, as the challenges faced such as politicization, over-staffing of institutions, and efforts for political involvement in senior civil service recruitment, are undermining the Public Administration's functioning, democratic governance and citizens' trust in state institutions. Moreover, the conference discussed Kosovo's journey towards the EU integration. Despite having made good strides in approximating legislation, Kosovo continues to lag behind politically and economically in terms of criteria for EU integration. The conference discussed over recent EU member states' experiences, analysing how they acted to advance in the accession process and where Kosovo's institutions should focus to achieve a more favourable position in EU integration path. **FOL Movement, 28.01.2022**

EU FOREIGN MINISTERS DISCUSSED ON HOW TO PRESERVE THE UNITY OF

BIH

After the EU Foreign Affairs Council session, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell stated that the European Union is ready to carry out all measures and instruments, implying both financial aid and restrictive measures, to ensure the unity of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This includes calling on political leaders to secure the functioning of BiH Constitution. The Ministers expressed full support for the High Representative, the EUFOR ALTHEA and the EU Special Envoy, as well as the US Special Representative, who is trying to implement electoral reform and constitutional amendments to improve the functioning of the state, as nationalism and separatist rhetoric are increasing. The Bosnian Serb leader and BiH Presidency member Milorad Dodik received sanctions from the U.S., as well as from the amendment adopted from the European Parliament to the annual Foreign Affairs Committee report. The amendment condemns the unconstitutional secessionist measures of the Republika Srpska authorities to establish parallel institutions in the fields of medicine and medical devices, justice, defence, security and taxation. According to Euronews, Hungary, Croatia and Slovenia are notably opposing countries to the sanctions against Serbia. **European Western Balkans, 22.02.2022**

ACTIVISTS ON THE STREETS OF MOSTAR: "WE DON'T WANT KUTIOL IN THE LOCAL COMMUNITY KUTI LIVAČ!"

Activists of the Civic Initiative "Kuti", gathered around the idea of not allowing illegal work of quarries near their houses in the local community Kuti Livač, organized the distribution of information leaflets on the streets of Mostar, talking to citizens interested in this problem.

As they say, the quarry at the "Zukulja" site is unacceptable and calls into question their survival and peaceful life in this area, because the distance from the excavation site to the first building where only 137 meters live!

Therefore, they called on their fellow citizens to support them in stopping illegality and endangering their homes. **Antikorupcijainfo, 23.02.2022**

ACTING DIRECTORS LONG STANDING PROBLEM IN SERBIA

Recent accidents in one of the biggest public enterprises in Serbia, the Electric Power Industry draw attention to the long-standing problem in these companies – the acting directors.

After the collapse of the energy system, the acting director of this company, Milorad Grčić submitted his written resignation which the Government of Serbia confirmed, although that move was not under legal procedure. Namely, Milorad Grčić was appointed in 2016, and his mandate expired in 2017, so he performed his function illegally until recently.

Unfortunately, Grčić was not the only illegal acting director – according to the research conducted by Transparency Serbia, over 70 per cent of public companies in Serbia have illegal acting directors which can perform duties until the appointment of executive directors.

Although apart from the duration of their mandates, there is not much difference between the position of the acting director and the executive director of the public company, still there has been a constant delay in resolving this problem so the question is for what reason?

Kori Udovički, former Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Public Administration and Local Self-Government, and current President of the Governing Board and Chief Economist in Centre for Advanced Economic Studies (CEVES), explained several reasons. The procedure for appointing, as well as dismissing an acting director is much easier. Besides, fewer and fewer serious professionals are ready to accept leadership positions in the public sector, since after an acting director's mandate has elapsed, this becomes a personally humiliating and legally risky position.

Zlatko Minić, Member of the Governing Board of Transparency Serbia, explained acting directors not only in public enterprises but in the public sector at all represent a symptom of a bigger problem – the non-existence of rule of law. **European Western Balkans, 14.02.2022**

ELECTORAL REFORM AND ANTI-CORRUPTION ARE PRIORITIES FOR ALBANIA

During the Political Assembly of the European People's Party, the chairman of the Democratic Party Lulzim Basha listed the fight against corruption as the main priority in the country, as Albania is ranked as the most corrupt country in Europe according to Transparency International. In addition to the fight against government and political corruption, the electoral and territorial reforms are priorities for the Democratic Party, together with strengthening the rule of law, which will give Albanian free and fair elections of local administrations without political conflicts. Regarding Kosovo, the chairman remarked how these turbulent times could represent an incentive for Europe to pay more attention and exert a greater influence on the recognition of Kosovo. Moreover, it could be a valuable opportunity for the conclusion of the agreement on mutual recognition between Kosovo and Serbia, in order to enable both countries to join the EU as soon as possible, leaving behind the tragic past. Lastly, Basha stressed that the Democratic Party fully supports the efforts of the EU and the US for a diplomatic solution to the tense situation between Ukraine and Russia, standing side by side in the Euro-Atlantic alliance. **Albanian Telegraphic Agency, 08.02.2022**

ALBANIA FALLS SIX PLACES IN CORRUPTION PERCEPTION INDEX

Albania worsened its Corruption Perception Index rank by six places from 2020, marking a decline of 27 places since 2016. Together with Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania stands last in corruption within the Southeast European region, falling well below both the world and Europe average corruption score. Transparency International report noted that fundamental rights such as freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and access to justice are integral to keeping corruption in check. However, the current wave of authoritarianism is driven by gradual efforts to undermine democracy. This is accomplished through attacks on civil and political rights, undermining the activities of election bodies, and controlling the media. In Albania, TI observed that 35 journalists had been targeted with lawsuits and intimidation in 2021. Furthermore, there was “excessive control of information” related to COVID-19, adding to the concerns over police violence during protests and breaches of freedom of assembly reported throughout the pandemic. The pandemic had been also used to reduce oversight and accountability for public procurement and foreign aid spending. **Euractiv, 26.02.2022**

THE ALBANIAN PARLIAMENT APPROVES THE EXTENSION OF THE DEADLINES OF THE VETTING BODIES

The Assembly reached a qualified majority on 10 February to approve the amendment to the Constitution, which provides for a 36-month extension for the functioning of vetting bodies, the Independent Qualification Commission, and Public Commissioners. The initiative received 118 votes in favor, none against, and four abstentions. The opposition decision was preceded by a joint press statement by the EU Delegation to Albania and the US Embassy in Tirana, urging all lawmakers not to view the vote as a “partisan issue.”

The Ambassador of the EU Delegation to Albania, Luigi Soreca, stressed that the EU welcomed the approval by an overwhelming majority by the Albanian Parliament of the constitutional changes for the extension of the mandate of the vetting bodies. Vetting institutions have closed over 500 vetting cases in the first instance, including all priority files, out of a total of 804 magistrates subject to vetting. Overall, more than 60% of the vetting files processed so far have resulted in dismissals or resignations. The extension of the mandate of the vetting bodies is necessary for the regular continuation of the vetting process, a key pillar of justice reform. This has been confirmed by the opinion of the Venice Commission on this issue. **Reporter.al, 10.02.2022**

SOUTHEAST EUROPE IS STILL WIDELY AFFECTED BY CORRUPTION

The World Peace Organization remarks how corruption remains a problem in Southeast European countries, affecting not only one country government but other important aspects such as freedom of media, independence of judiciary and the financial sector. Even Slovenia, the highest ranking country in Corruption Perception Index within the region, has worsened its position from last year due to increasing media restrictions and distrust in institutions. The World Peace Organization also pointed out that reports through the years have analysed how these countries are repeatedly affected by corruption scandals, favouritism and preferential treatments from ruling parties, but little has been done to hold individuals and institutions accountable. It is extremely important that anti-corruption measures are not turned into political tools used against political rivals as this would further halt significant progress, especially for the process towards the EU membership which, however, would not solve all the problems within the region. **N1, 31.01.2022**

CORRUPT AFFAIR WITH INCINERATORS IN ALBANIA



Concession contracts for the construction of incinerators in Elbasan, Fier, and Tirana, which are estimated to amount to more than 430 million euros, have been at the center of allegations of abuse of office by senior officials and ministers. The winners of the concessions are a network of small companies in partnership with each other and companies registered in tax havens with unknown owners. The company “Albtech Energy shpk” was announced the winner in December 2014 of competition with-

out competition worth 22 million euros, in just two days, for the construction of the incinerator in Elbasan. The company “Integrated Technology Services” was announced the winner of the tender for constructing the incinerator in Fier in September 2016.

At the end of October 2021, the Assembly set up a commission of inquiry into incinerators at the opposition’s request, while on December 14, 2021, the Special Prosecution Against Organized Crime and Corruption (SPAK) arrested the former Minister of Environment, Leter Koka. The former Minister is accused of abuse of office and corruption in connection with the concession procedure of the incinerator of Elbasan. Through a fictitious scheme, these companies have transferred monetary amounts on behalf of the former Minister in exchange for issuing the license. Currently, the case is being investigated by SPAK, but recently also by the investigative commission questioning 41 people and senior government officials, including ministers and Prime Minister of Albania Edi Rama.

Prime Minister Edi Rama, during his speech, said that he does not deal with the procedures of who builds the incinerators or which company follows the procedures but sees only the work and the conclusions. According to the Prime Minister, the contracts will continue to be paid, as there is still no final decision by the justice in Albania. Another witness summoned to the investigative commission was also the Mayor of Tirana. He is suspected of having exceeded the financial commitment of the municipalities of Tirana district to pay to the concessionaire without passing it to the Municipal Council. During his testimony in the commission, Erion Veliaj stated that he expressed only in principle about the procedure, and then it was the Municipal Council of Tirana to take the decision. The investigative commission closed the investigation, and it is expected to issue 2 reports regarding the case, while SPAK continues the inquiry for the most talk-about case currently in Albania. **Report TV, Balkan Web, Dosija.al, 28.02.2022**

ALBANIA STARTS INVESTIGATING ‘PANDORA PAPERS’ OFFSHORE TRANSACTIONS CASE

Albania’s Special Prosecution Against Corruption and Organized Crime, SPAK, has started investigations into EUR 3.6 million of transactions made by the Bosnian engineering company that built the electricity interconnection line to Kosovo. The company paid EUR 3.6 million to a small UAE-based consultancy, AL Energy Transmission, headed by the Albanian businessman Vasil Kallupi. The transactions, revealed by BIRN’s investigation in October 2021, though not necessarily illegal, could however bring a potential risk of corruption. As the investigation is undergoing, the SPAK could not provide any further information yet. *Balkan Insight, 05.01.2022*

DATA LEAKS AND CORRUPTION ON THE AGENDA OF EU-ALBANIA TALKS

The EU-Albania committee monitoring the EU integration progress met in February 2022, with discussions including the fight against corruption and last year's massive data leaks, which saw almost a million people's data including name, ID, salary, phone number and voting preference in the public domain.

The agenda of the EU-Albania Stabilisation and Association Committee prepared by the European Commission included discussions on three agencies recently established by the Albanian government, remarking that Albania must deliver concrete results in the fight against corruption at high levels of power and create robust preventive measures. The establishment of the three agencies without evaluating their impact on governance, well-defined functions and accountability mechanisms has raised concerns regarding the government's lack of transparency. Furthermore, the legal opinion on the agency provided by the Ministry of Justice has been kept secret from the public, despite requests for information.

Regarding the data leak scandals, Prime Minister Edi Rama denied any government responsibility despite the leaks coming from government institutions. In fact, the Agency for Media and Information centralises all government information and public relations, and monitors media and social media for the rhetoric towards the government, representing a clear threat to media freedom. **Euractiv, 16.02.2022**





FORTHCOMING EVENTS



NARROWING THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC GAP BETWEEN THE EU AND THE WESTERN BALKANS

On 4 March 2022, the European Policy Centre (CEP) is organising an event with the representatives of the EU Delegation to Serbia and the Ministry of European Integration (MEI) to discuss the importance of the IPA III funding, as well as the Western Balkan's capacities and capabilities to make the best use of the EU's financial assistance. The meeting will try to analyse some important questions, such as how the region will be able to absorb these funds, and what is the role of civil society when it comes to programming and implementing IPA-related projects.

REGIONAL MEETING ON ACHIEVING ACCURATE, COMPREHENSIVE AND STANDARD RECORDING OF ASSET RECOVERY STATISTICS

The regional meeting on achieving accurate, comprehensive and standard recording of asset recovery statistics will take place in Pristina, on 1 March 2022. This is part of the project "Combating corruption and organised crime in the Western Balkans through strengthening regional cooperation in asset recovery", implemented by the Advice on Individual Rights in Europe in cooperation with the Regional Anti-Corruption Initiative Secretariat. The meeting represents the start of the effective assessment of asset recovery processes in the Western Balkans, and is a step towards sharing experiences and ensuring continuity of accurate data collection and establishing a common system across the region.



**REPORTS
AND
ANALYSIS**



FIGHT AGAINST CORRUPTION: WHEN POLITICS DICTATES RESULTS

A coalition agreement signed by three leaders of the parliamentary majority immediately after the parliamentary election rests on seven key principles, similar to the current Prime Minister's keynote speech delivered before Parliament, one of which is the fight against corruption and organized crime to depoliticize key government institutions. The decision was made to take the fight against corruption and organized crime to a more senior political level by tasking the Deputy Prime Minister in coordinating Montenegro's security services and implementing the complicated but necessary reforms. Despite the institutional blockage that could hinder the Government's "ruthless" fight against corruption and organized crime, the new majority has taken steps to develop legislative and institutional capacity for strengthening the rule of law. Certain unilaterally adopted and politically spurred legal provisions, such as 'skipping through' prescribed rules when amending state prosecution laws, will lead to unsustainable and non-functional institutions, also prompting a negative diplomatic reaction and leaving room for political influence over the prosecution service. Similarly, MPs had proposed amendments to the Law on Internal Affairs that envisaged the exercise of political control over the work of the police. **Center for Democratic Transition, December 2021**

SPINNING IN CIRCLES: NO PROGRESS MADE IN KEY AREAS

Except from encouraging and remarking messages, the Intergovernmental Conference between Montenegro and the EU held in December 2021 did not yield significant results due to the lack of significant progress in the rule of law area. This stagnation was confirmed by NGOs, internal actors and the European Commission reports. Montenegro has not closed a single negotiating chapter since 2017 due to the then informal conditionality mechanism that meant that other chapters could not be closed until sufficient progress had been made in the chapters related to the rule of law. With the new negotiating methodology, this approach has become a formal requirement, as there will be no closing of chapters until the interim benchmarks in Chapters 23 and 24 are met. **Center for Democratic Transition, December 2021**

THE IMPACT OF REGIONAL ORGANIZATIONS AND INITIATIVES IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

"The Actual Impact of Regional Organizations and Initiatives on Regional Cooperation/Integration and Good Neighborly Relations in the Western Balkans: Success and Limiting Factors" paper addresses the growing number of regional initiatives and organisation against ethnic disputes. In some ex-Yugoslavia countries, ethnic disputes contributed to establishing economic and political stability, while in other countries it did not happen. The paper studies both success and limiting factors of ethnic disputes, identifying their drivers to strengthen future cooperation and integration, especially during the pandemic and recovery period, also examining how existing regional frameworks helped or hindered the EU membership process.

Furthermore, the study analyses how regional organisations and initiatives could provide even more impactful reconciliation and good neighbourly relations, as they still show some important long-lasting issues and diplomatic fractures. The paper will elucidate how regional organisations and initiatives might optimise their impacts in these politically delicate areas and which mechanisms, instruments, and good practices they may use to enhance effectiveness. **IDSCS, 24.01.2022**

HOW COULD THE PARLIAMENT COUNTER DISINFORMATION IN NORTH MACEDONIA?

Despite the worldwide democracy threat of disinformation exacerbated by the pandemic, the North Macedonia government addressed this challenge through few policy initiatives and informal initiatives from non-governmental actors, with little involvement of Parliament or the broader society. The Parliament of North Macedonia is responsible for holding institutions accountable by exercising its legislative and oversight roles, increasing the awareness about the adverse effects of disinformation at national level. However, the topic has never been brought to the parliamentary floor, nor tackled proactively by the Parliament. The paper briefly provides an overview of the national disinformation context, an insight into the roles of parliament, government, and the media in the fight against disinformation, and suggests measures to strengthen the parliament's role and contribution to countering disinformation. **IDSCS, 09.02.2022**



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Development and Integrity



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