

Association for the Advancement of Journalistic Practices Innovative Media

Annual Report for 2021

Covering the programme activities between

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Innovative Media Mission and Vision

Vision

The Association for the Advancement of Journalistic Practices Innovative Media envisions a society in which engaged and aware journalists actively use innovative tools to exercise their duties, a society in which they are cautious about influencing and demanding accountability from the authorities, while ensuring democratic, accountable and prepared governance.

Mission to Achieve the Vision

Innovative Media protects, promotes and advances professional standards in the media by building capacities of journalists and strengthens the awareness and capacity of young journalists for them to take on the best possible role as innovative journalists respecting ethical norms and are activists for democracy.

Program areas

Innovative Media strengthens the awareness and capacity of citizens and civil society to assume their fullest possible role as activists for democracy, while supporting government to fulfil its democratic role in serving society. Innovative Media work is focused within three main program areas:

- 1. Combating disinformation;
- 2. Upholding democratic values through watchdog journalism;
- 3. Advancing professional journalism standards.

Basic Information

Registration data	Contact information
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Executive Summary

The Association for the Advancement of Journalistic Practices **Innovative Media – Skopje** was established in 2019 in Skopje, North Macedonia by a group of journalists and civil society. Over the years it had established diverse portfolio of capacities forming lasting partnerships with other civil society organizations, donors and media outlets.

Innovative Media projects conducted during 2021 primarily provided support for the news portal Portalb.mk, with an aim to provide the Albanian speaking population of North Macedonia and abroad with accurate and reliable information, through news and analysis production, with a focus on



Portalb.mk

the reform process of European Union (EU) accession and the benefits and responsibilities resulting from the NATO membership. By producing news relevant to all citizens regardless of their ethnic origin, Portalb.mk contributes to the strengthening of the inter-ethnic relations and establishing social cohesion in Macedonia.

During 2021 Innovative Media responded effectively to the COVID-19 crisis which marked the last two years. Our programs provided substantial support to journalists, civil society, public servants, youth and the general public in facing the challenges resulting from the pandemic.

In particular, the media outlets supported by Innovative Media provided a timely response to the growing volume of disinformation preceding and following the outbreak of the pandemic as well as the political processes in the country that exacerbated the situation with the disinformation often time. The news portal Portalb.mk cooperated closely with the fact-checking service Truthmeter.mk and the Critical Thinking for Mediawise Citiens – CriThink.mk online resource center on production and dissemination of debunking articles on the topic of COVID-19 and vaccines making them available to the Albanian language speaking audiences in North Macedonia, Kosovo, Albania and the diaspora. This committed effort contributed significantly to raising awareness among the general public about the spreading of dangerous disinformation, particularly on social media.

In 2021 Innovative Media received support from two key donors, enabling partnerships contributing to increasing the scope and quality of its work – the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) from Washington, DC, USA, the donor of the project "Promoting Credible and Reliable Reporting in Albanian Language - Portalb.mk" and the Foundation for Internet and Society Metamorphosis from Skopje, North Macedonia, which provided institutional and capacity building support, as well as synergies in the media work through several projects promoting media pluralism, fact-checking and media literacy.

Below is an overview of the projects Innovative Media has worked on in 2021 and of the highlights of some of the achievements.

Innovative Media Activities and Projects in 2021

Innovative Media conducted a range of activities in 2021 in order to promote the crucial role of free and professional media in providing knowledge and in giving voice to citizens of Republic of North Macedonia in general, and in particular the primary audience of Portalb.mk - the ethnic Albanian community from the country and the region, as basic condition for empowering citizens to meaningfully participate in democratic processes.

The news portal Portalb.mk was developed in April 2012, and over the years grew into one of the leading and most credible sources of information in Albanian language from Macedonia. Its dedication to strict implementation of journalistic standards makes Portalb the attention to audience According to research by rating agency Gemius, Portalb is the most influential Albanian-language online media outlet in Macedonia, in terms of audience reception, and its original production also serves as a beacon of professional journalism and increases the pluralism in this segment of the media scene in Macedonia and the region.

In a very segregated media environment, Portalb contributes to increasing the social cohesion by providing an important linguistic bridge towards the Albanian-speaking communities by reporting on issues affecting citizens of all ethnicities in the country and translating contents produced in Macedonian. Its reputation as relevant and serious source of information is compounded by high popularity thanks to innovative use of new technologies media. It introduced consistent use of live video streaming via social networks which further increased its popularity.

The impact of Portalb.mk work also transcended the language barriers through direct cooperation and content sharing with the News Agency Meta.mk, operating in Macedonian, other Balkan languages and English, and the only fact-checking service in North Macedonia the Truthmeter.mk, producing content in Macedonian, Albanian and English. This cooperation served as nexus of a wider syndication network of online media from North Macedonia that included local portals from all eight planning regions, disseminating the articles focused on accountability of public officials and debunking disinformation, in particular related to COVID-19 pandemic.

Some of the highlights of the Innovative Media work during 2021 included:

- Portalb.mk published a series of investigative stories, in the framework of the Increasing Civic Engagement in the Digital Agenda Initiative. These investigative stories resulted with the issuing of a decision by the Office for Management of Registers which notes that the institution will no longer request citizens to submit birth certificates 'not older than six months' as has previously been the practice. This decision was a direct consequence of Portalb's research, which gave light to multiple testimonies from citizens and expert opinions and also requested explanations from the respective institutions.
- In 2021 Portalb.mk published over 400 fact-checking and anti-disinformation articles in Albanian language, with the majority dealing with the **issue of COVID 19 and vaccines**. Committed debunking of the infodemic contributed significantly to raising awareness among the general public about dangerous disinformation spread via social media in particular.
- Portalb.mk watchdog work continued to exert pressure on public authorities to address relevant issues, in particular those affecting **young people** from the Generation Z through the CTRL+Z

section of the website. Content produced and disseminated in cooperation with Meta.mk led to spurring authorities to act upon demands of the young people such as <u>promising</u> procurement of monitors for diabetes that will be free for all patients, after a series of articles and interviews.

- In October 2021 Portalb.mk newsroom staff joined the Rapid Communication System, established through cooperation with Metamorphosis foundation and the Cabinet of the Prime Minister, consisting of instant messaging groups joining journalists and government representatives, expediting the communication of fact-checkers and institutions to combat disinformation via increased availability of official information regarding dubious online contents, leading to prevention of their viral dissemination.
- In 2021 Portalb.mk newsroom was accepted as beneficiary of the project of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) that provides capacity building for the staff with the goal of enabling the media outlet to establish a fact-checking department. During the next year, after completion of the capacity building activities, Portalb.mk will be able to apply for certification as signatory of the IFCN Code of Principles, enabling full inclusion into this prestigious network.

Key projects in 2021

Promoting Credible and Reliable Reporting in Albanian Language - Portalb.mk

Project objectives included:

- To provide independent news and non-biased public interest information on political and economic issues in Albanian language.
- To provide citizens with information and explanatory content about NATO's support to North Macedonia's security challenges.
- To educate and inform the citizens about the EU accession process, esp. about the fulfilment of the required reforms (EU Acquis).
- To provide a platform for open public debate on important societal issues.
- To increase news outreach by fostering content exchange and translation from Macedonian news portals, thus, contributing to social cohesion and relaxing tensed interethnic relations.

Project results included:

- Increased citizen awareness of situation in North Macedonia in particular about political issues related to EU accession and NATO membership, accountability and transparency.
- Increased usage of the fact-based journalistic contents by independent media, civil society, pro-democracy institutions and other stakeholders.
- Diminishing the gap between Macedonian and Albanian reporting thus contributing in decreasing the tendency for interethnic divides.
- Counter the disinformation related to the EU accession and NATO membership of North Macedonia and the Western Balkans, and

Implementation period: 01.07.2020 – 30.06.2022

Geographical scope: North Macedonia

Partner: Metamorphosis Foundation

Donor: National Endowment for Democracy (NED)

political developments.	Implomentation
Combating Disinformation through Fact-Checking and Media Literacy	Implementation period: 01.01.2021 – 31.12.2021
Through mainstreaming this activity in all aspects of its work, Innovative Media provides support for production and dissemination of fact-checking, anti-disinformation content of Portalb.mk in close cooperation with the fact-checking service Truthmeter.mk and News Agency Meta.mk, serving as a nexus of network of cooperation encompassing local online media outlets from North Macedonia. The produced content includes informative articles (news and analysis) as well as educative content aimed at enhancing media literacy and critical thinking in Albanian language, addressing the needs of audiences in North Macedonia, Kosovo and Albania, as well as ethnic Albanian diaspora.	Geographical scope: North Macedonia Partners: - Metamorphosis Foundation - Truthmeter.mk - Meta.mk News Agency
 Key objectives of this work include: To increase awareness and knowledge of decision-makers and the general public about the nature and effect of foreign malign propaganda and disinformation in North Macedonia To strengthen the capacities of individual journalists and media outlets for fact-based watchdog journalism focused on exposing malign influences. Public Outreach and Advocacy for increased public debate and demand for constructive policy measures As a result, the participating partners have created wide array of resources detailing the nature and effect of foreign malign propaganda and disinformation in North Macedonia and the region, as well as conducted watchdog journalism and research supporting advocacy actions increase policy makers' engagement. 	Donor: Metamorphosis Foundation
The Region Through the Facts This cooperation with Faktoje, supported by the Balkan Trust for Democracy has addressed issues affecting citizens on both sides of the border through watchdog journalism and reporting on a daily basis. Portalb.mk successfully affected the intervention of the authorities in changing the traffic signs leading to the border crossing point to Albania, which still reads People's Republic of Albania although the name of the country has changed since 1991. Additionally, during the heavy snowfall in January, the road toward the border crossing remained stuck in snow, until Portalb.mk began seeking accountability from the authorities. In addition, this project trains young journalists from both sides of the border on the methodology of fact-checking as well as on data journalism.	Period: 30.07.2020 – 30.07.2021 Geographical scope: North Macedonia and Albania Partners: Faktoje, Albania Donor: Balkan Trust for Democracy

Critical Thinking for Mediawise Citizens – CriThink.mk

Critical Thinking for Mediawise Citizens – CriThink.mk	
Portalb.mk provided dissemination and production of the Albanian- language content for CriThink Action, implemented by Metamorphosis and Eurothink with support from European Union (EU) promoted media literacy as basis for safeguarding the right of citizens to hold diverse opinions, via stimulating a culture of critical thinking, pluralism of opinion and democratic	
values. CriThink project developed a robust infrastructure for conducting the planned activities, enabling creation of educational contents and tools	<u>crithink.mk</u>
by establishing the online resource centre CriThink.mk, and engaging a diverse team of relevant experts, as well as fostering relations of cooperation with key stakeholder: state institutions, media outlets and civil society organizations.	Implementation period: 01.01.2018 – 30.06.2021
Portalb.mk staff also took part in providing capacity building activities, supporting partnerships between local/grassroots CSOs and local/national media through 17 small grants and a tailored training and mentorship	Geographical scope: North Macedonia
program. Overall CriThink contributed to the strengthening of the national Media Literacy Network, establishing synergies with its members and other	Partners:
media literacy projects supported by the EU, in line with the other networking activities in coordination with the Delegation of the European Union in Skopje. The general public and in particular social networks users benefited from	 Metamorphosis Foundation Centre for European Strategies – EUROTHINK
the production and online dissemination of educational contents in Macedonian and Albanian languages, addressing daily issues of confronting media manipulations and disinformation, through the prism of informal education on media literacy and application of principles of critical thinking. This proved particularly important during periods of increased political tensions and in the context of COVID-19 pandemic, as CriThink infrastructure and established relations of cooperation with independent media proved crucial in providing capacities for fact-checking and debunking disinformation. The website and its social media accounts remain important education resources for media literacy with content in Macedonian and Albanian language.	Donor: European Union
Credible News for Empowered Youth	Period 01.06.2021 – 31.03.2022
 The project aims to increase youth engagement in public life empowering them to demand resolution of policy issues that affect their lives. It broadcasts the weekly news show for youth Shortcut – which summarizes the most important events of the week in a format attractive and of interest to youth. In this way it engages youth in being more informed about matters that affect them directly, while also providing a platform for them to engage and directly seek accountability from public officials. Its content are widely read and disseminated and it is becoming an important initiative trusted and used by youth. Project objectives include: Youth born after '95 – Gen-Z are informed by media and empowered to voice their concerns and interests and engage in public issues 	Geographical scope: North Macedonia Partners: - Metamorphosis Foundation - Meta.mk News Agency Donor: UK Embassy in Skopje
 Mainstream media are reflecting the views of Gen-Z in project related themes 	

 Rise of the number of the new youth initiatives voicing concerns reported in the media Project results include: Increased availability of watchdog reporting about priority issues. Increased level of public awareness about democratic values through practical application of professional journalism standards and critical thinking. Increased media pluralism in North Macedonia through production of news (multimedia content) and networking with media for amplified dissemination of the created content. Promoting the Accountability and Transparency of Public Reforms The project aims to promote the accountability of public officials and institutions on important policy areas with a particular focus on public administration, judicial system – rule of law, fundamental rights, and freedom of expression. The project produces various journalistic content – including fact-checking and analytical articles addressing issues raised in European Commission reports on the progress of Republic of North Macedonia in implementation of reforms needed to join the European Union, explaining the issues and institutional responsibilities for the general public by directly relating responsibilities for increasing quality of life of the citizens. In addition, quarterly monitoring reports following a pre-defined methodology, assess and highlight the degree to which promises and initiated policies were put to practice. The project developed the capacities of partner local media to conduct fact checking and sustain the objectives of the project. At the same time, local partners were engaged in wide dissemination of project content. Established Rapid Communication System (RCS) enables speedy communication between journalists and representatives of state institutions via messaging apps in order to debunk disinformation related to their competences,	Period 01.07.2021-30.06.2022 Geographical scope: North Macedonia Partners: - Metamorphosis Foundation - Truthmeter.mk - Meta.mk Local media network: - Apla.mk - Meta.mk Local media network: - Apla.mk - Drnka.mk - Flaka.com.mk Donor: National Endowment for Democracy - NED
Rapid Response to Vaccine Disinformation	Period:
Rapid Response to Vaccine Disinformation project addresses the COVID-19 vaccine distrust in North Macedonia through fact-checking and networking activities. It adopts a combined approach of (1) increased production and dissemination of verified and educational media contents (targeting media professionals and general audience); (2) seeking transparency from the authorities and facilitating cooperation with media and civil society; (3) enabling direct cooperation between journalists, medical professionals and other stakeholders. In the framework of the project important content that raised awareness about the risk of the COVID 19 disinformation were produced and disseminated widely with the support of seven local media partners, and in synergy with the Established Rapid Communication System (RCS).	 01.06. 2021 – 31.01.2022 Geographical scope: North Macedonia Partners: Metamorphosis Foundation Truthmeter.mk Meta.mk Partners (media network): Aberdzija.mk Apla.mk Drnka.mk Duma.mk Tvm.mk Kumanovonews.mk Nistori.com

	Donor: Balkan Trust for
	Democracy
Increasing Civic Engagement in the Digital Agenda - ICEDA	Period: 01.01.2020 – 31.12.2022
Portalb.mk provided media support for the implementation of the ICEDA project, through daily journalistic coverage of project activities, watchdog and investigative reporting. During 2021 the project was in its second year of implementation, striving towards increasing the engagement of CSOs in shaping and implementing the Digital Agenda in the Western Balkans by providing multiple networking and capacity building opportunities. In 2021 the ICEDA network has been joined by <u>15</u> more CSOs/ sub-grantees in partnership with 19 media, working on advocating on specific issues related to the Digital Agenda in their respective countries. The 20 CSOs from the first cycle of the ICEDA Grants Scheme have continued on assisting the community in using specific public e-services and increasing their digital literacy through a variety of activities within their 15 e-government support centers, managing to support around 20.000 citizens. In two years the project has provided 38 capacity building opportunities for civil servants, CSOs, media workers and the total number of participants from the whole region that have benefited from these opportunities is 3222. The ICEDA network has also produced a number of <u>educational and informative e-content pieces</u> (investigative articles, videos, animations, infographics and visualizations, Digital Agenda Observatory Country reports and Cumulative report on Digital Agenda advancement, etc.).	Geographical scope: North Macedonia, Kosovo Albania, Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina Project lead: Metamorphosis Foundation Partners: Center for Democratic Transition, Montenegro Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability, Serbia, e-Governance Academy Estonia, Levizja Mjaft! (Albania), NGO 35 mm, Montenegro, Open Data Kosovo (Kosovo) Donor:
	European Union
Western Balkans Anti-Disinformation Hub: Exposing Malign Influences through Watchdog Journalism	Period: 01.11. 2021 – 30.04.2025
 The main goal of the project is exposing foreign malign influence in Western Balkans by debunking and mapping the flow of disinformation, misinformation and propaganda affecting development of democracy, originating from external actors trough the region. Project activities include: Development of regional early-warning data-driven infrastructure that will serve to prevent harmful impact in the region from disinformation campaigns originating from foreign actors. Watchdog journalism – production of high-quality journalistic contents in the primary formats of debunking articles, in-depth stories and investigative reporting stories. Research focused on mapping, documenting and explaining the venues of malign foreign influence in each country and the WB region as whole. Data collection and analysis resulting in creation of data-driven early warning infrastructure centered around the knowledge hub (database). Public outreach and Advocacy – engagement of general audiences and 	Geographical scope: North Macedonia, Kosovo Albania, Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina Project lead: Metamorphosis Foundation Partners: ISAC – International and Security Affairs Centre, Serbia Zašto ne (Why Not), Bosnia and Herzegovina Center for Democratic Transition, Montenegro
increasing awareness via promotional campaign for public education and social media outreach; contributing to policy change via advocacy consultations and public events gathering relevant stakeholders to increase their awareness and engagement in the public debate on	Faktoje, Albania Sbunker, Kosovo

Cooperation with/in Various Networks

During 2021, Innovative Media participated in the work of the following networks and coalitions:

Media Literacy Network - MLN Throughout 2021 Portalb.mk promoted the work of the members of the Media Literacy Network, established in North Macedonia in 2017 and administered by the state regulatory body in charge of media literacy the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services. In particular, this activity intensified in synergy with Metamorphosis' CriThink project and in order to increase the visibility of the MLN-organized Media Literacy Days in October and November of 2021. Global Voices in Albanian	mediumskapismenost.mk
Portalb.mk contributed to translation and dissemination of the news of the <u>Albanian</u> version of the website of the international, multilingual, primarily volunteer community of writers, translators, academics, and human rights activists <u>Global Voices Online</u> . Global Voices members include over 1200 citizen journalists, analysts, online media experts and translators, reporting from 167 countries and translating into up to 30 languages.	sq.globalvoicesonline.org
ACTION SEE - Accountability, Technology and Institutional Openness Network in South-East Europe Through reporting via Portalb.mk and participation of Innovative Media team members in events organized by ACTION SEE network, IM increased visibility of the projects of this network that enables cooperation between leading digital transparency organizations from North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro and Albania. Its members use new technologies for empowering citizens and increasing public institutions' accountability via fact-checking projects, annual POINT conferences on new technologies and political accountability, and developing the regional Index of Transparency.	ActionSEE www.actionsee.org
Anti-Disinformation Network for the Balkans (AND-Balkans) Portalb.mk newsroom is among the founding members of this network that serves as the basis of a cooperation between civil society organizations, media outlets, educational institutions and all other relevant stakeholders with a goal of forming a wide front on countering disinformation through affirmation of the highest standards of fact- checking and professional journalism, as well as promoting media literacy & critical thinking based on the Declaration that re-affirms the freedom of expression in its various forms. ADN-Balkans developed gradually through bilateral and multilateral cooperation of its founding members, and from November 2021 it provided infrastructure for Metamorphosis-led project Western Balkans Anti-Disinformation Hub: Exposing Malign Influences through Data- Driven Watchdog Journalism in the six countries of the region, with support of the Kingdom of the Netherlands.	<u>antidisinfo.net</u>

Other cooperation's and public appearances in 2021:

- Portalb and <u>Radio MOF</u> signed a memorandum for cooperation, by which they enhanced the sharing of articles, materials and experiences between journalists.
- The Editor in Chief of Portalb, Elida Zylbeari held a <u>two-hour</u> <u>lection</u> on the topic of how professional media work and the standards of journalism in the "Youth for Euro- Atlantic Future 2021" organized by the American Corner – Tetovo.
- The Editor in Chief, Elida Zylbeari participated in the <u>Bled</u> <u>Strategic Forum</u> from 1st - 2nd September 2021, invited by Centre for European Perspective, also a grantee of National Endowment for Democracy.
- Zylbeari's output was published in BIRN's big <u>Platform B</u> <u>research</u> about trends, opportunities and obstacles female journalists in the Balkans come across.
- Zylbeari <u>attended a meeting with the US Ambassador, Kate</u> <u>Byrnes</u> and with the EU Ambassador in Macedonia, David Geere and the new French Ambassador in Macedonia, Cyrille Baumgartner.

Zylbeari was a panelist in several public events:

- <u>"Freedom of expression on the Internet Common</u> <u>Challenge for the EU and North Macedonia</u>" which took place on December 2021 through the ZOOM platform and at Europe House, organized by the European Policy Institute – Skopje. With this event, they also celebrated the International Human Rights Day.
- Panelist in the discussion Zylbeari was a guest speaker in a <u>debate show called "Argument"</u> at the National Television in which the challenges of journalism at the time of the coronavirus pandemic were discussed.
- Participated in the debate "<u>Post-COVID-19 reality: What is</u> <u>the path to a fairer society?</u>", organized by Open Society Foundation in their 30th anniversary.
- Online panel discussion dedicated to fact-checking as a means of promoting media literacy on the occasion of 2 April- International Fact-Checking Day. The discussion was organized by the project "Critical Thinking for Mediawise Citizens – CriThink" implemented by "Metamorphosis" and "Eurothink" with the support of the European Union.

•	Presenting at the Platform B research of BIRN	
•	Debate on democracy and disinformation, organized by NGO Civil	
•	E-Society, organized by Foundation Metamorphosis	
•	The youth debate, organized by Meta.mk	

The Team of Innovative Media

Elida Zylbeari – Experienced journalist and editor. She holds a master's degree on Diplomacy and bachelor's degree in Communication sciences from SEE University in North Macedonia. Since 2012 she is the Editor in chief of the Albanian news portal <u>www.Portalb.mk</u>.

Suad Bajrami – BA in Albanian language and literature, Ss. Cyril and Methodius University Skopje. He works as a journalist for the media projects. Since 2015, he's been a working as journalist for Portalb.mk.

Fisnik Xhelili – Graduated in Social Sciences at the University of Ljubljana. He works as a journalist for the media projects. Since 2021, he's been a working as journalist for Portalb.mk.

Shefkije Alasani – Graduated in Social Sciences at the University of Ljubljana. She works as a journalist for the media projects. Since 2019, he's been a working as journalist for Portalb.mk.

Teuta Buçi – Graduated journalist at the State University of Tetovo. Works as a journalist in media projects. Since 2019, she's been a working as journalist for Portalb.mk. She has previously worked in several other media.

Faton Curi – Graduate Professor of Albanian Language and Literature at the University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius – Skopje. Works as a journalist in media projects. Since 2019, he's been a working as journalist for Portalb.mk.

Naile Dauti – Graduated journalist at the State University of Tetovo. Works as a journalist in media projects. Since 2020, she's been a working as journalist for Portalb.mk. She has previously worked in several other media.

Dorina Ajdini – Graduated in Marketing and Management at SEE University. Works as a journalist in media projects. Since 2020, she's been a working as journalist for Portalb.mk. She has previously worked in several other media outlets in North Macedonia.