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REGIONAL ACTIVITY

BALKAN MEDIA ASSISTANCE PROGRAM



Goals

Enable media practitioners to become more competitive in local and regional marketplaces

Strengthen the sustainability of the independent media sector across the region, thus amplifying independent voices

Duration

Sep 2017 – July 2022

USAID Funding

\$10 million for activities in North Macedonia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, and Serbia

Implementing Partner

FHI 360

in collaboration with Internews

Key National Partners

360 Degrees

Sloboden Pecat

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BACKGROUND

Despite progress in some areas of media development, the media sector in the Western Balkans remains fragile and under threat. Weak economies and long periods of the political capture of media and advertising markets have left independent media, particularly online outlets, unable to compete with the entertaining, yet biased, pro-government news outlets. Media are also challenged to collect and analyze demographic and audience interest data, which hinders effective business strategies that create monetized products and services to expand audience reach. Public trust in media continues to be low and audiences are increasingly unable to get information on issues that affect their daily lives. Further, as journalists often lack access to technology and have limited skills to use it, they struggle to produce multimedia material, such as infographics or videos, through which they can provide balanced information that the average media consumer can use. To address these issues, USAID contributes to North Macedonia's efforts to increase the accountability of government institutions and of citizens, as well as their ability to counter corruption, by strengthening independent media.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

The primary objectives of the Balkan Media Assistance Program (BMAP) are to: 1) provide outlets and media partners with more substantial and stable resources to operate as viable enterprises by introducing new management, business, and operational models; 2) strengthen the ability of content producers to engage wider audiences and expand reach across different demographic groups; and 3) foster stronger partnerships to advance solutions on common challenges in the digital space.

In North Macedonia, the program provides training, mentoring, and technical assistance to two key partners: 360 Degrees and Sloboden Pecat. The project assists these partners in business strategizing, online marketing and sales, digital advertising, audience analytics, and integrated (traditional and digital) newsrooms. The partners also receive annual technology investment grants that support high quality professional reporting through newsrooms that integrate TV, digital media, and print media.

BMAP also provides engaging content grants to key partners and other media. Outlets in North Macedonia that have received past support include IDEA SEE (Vidi Vaka), Justicia Dosie, Koha Macedonia, Portal Njuz, Radio YEF (Youth Educational Forum), and Sakam da kazam (SDK.mk).

BMAP also created a regional online learning and information exchange platform for journalists (www.balkansmedia.org), which provides information and training for media professionals on topics such as cybersecurity, creating infographics, digital journalism ethics, and data visualization.

ACHIEVEMENTS AND IMPACT

Sloboden Pecat created a new digital newsroom and introduced web advertising as a source of revenue. In 2019, they launched a new website to give them an active digital presence and established an online television program, Slobodna TV. In 2020, they created the daily TV show "Morning Briefing" which they produce in-house in a TV studio that the project helped equip. As a result, the outlet more than quadrupled the size of its audience from 281,000 in November 2018 to 1,537,000 in September 2021.

360 Degrees has emerged as an important player in North Macedonia's digital media market, growing from just under 6,000 users in November 2018 to almost 606,400 in September 2021. The outlet transitioned from focusing on TV production to becoming a digital media platform. Previously fully dependent on donor grants, 360 Degrees is on its way to full financial sustainability, selling diverse video products and providing advertising and content production services to different clients.

Digital storytelling studio Vidi Vaka received three grants to support innovative content that boosted audience engagement. In 2020, the studio established partnerships with seven local media across North Macedonia in which the local outlets amplify Vidi Vaka's content outside of Skopje and in turn Vidi Vaka reports on local news.

Further, BMAP's media partners won media awards for content created with support from the engaging content grants, including:

- 360 Degrees and its journalist, Irena Karevska, won first prize from the Council of Media Ethics, supported by the OSCE Mission in Skopje, for the best multimedia story about Roma children who missed the start of the school year because they did not have computers to participate in virtual learning.
- The Council of Media Ethics awarded the second prize to Hristina Gjorgjievska, a journalist from Vidi Vaka, for her mini-documentary about the labor rights of textile workers.
- Vidi Vaka also received a prize from the Macedonian Platform Against Poverty for the documentary "Education Outside the Network" about two siblings who lacked the resources to take part in mandatory online schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic. The video garnered more than 630,000 views and inspired the Mayor of Kumanovo to provide laptops to all the children in the village where the video was filmed.

