



REPORT

NETWORKING CONFERENCE & CAPACITY BUILDING EVENT

Enhancing Media Education: Networking with EU Journalism Schools
15 – 17 December 2025, Skopje, North Macedonia



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IMPRESSUM

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ABOUT MEDIA4EU

MEDIA 4 EU: CIVIL SOCIETY PROGRAM FOR THE PARTICIPATION OF MEDIA IN NORTH MACEDONIA'S EU MEMBERSHIP NEGOTIATION

The Media4EU project represents a comprehensive three-year initiative designed to strengthen the capacity of media professionals and civil society organizations in North Macedonia as the country navigates its European Union accession process. Led by EUROTHINK – Center for European Strategies in partnership with ALDA – the European Association for Local Democracy and the Council of Europe Office in Skopje, this project addresses the critical need to enhance journalism quality, combat misinformation, and foster meaningful public engagement in the EU integration process.

North Macedonia faces significant challenges in its media landscape despite constitutional guarantees of freedom of expression. The lack of transparent funding models has left media outlets vulnerable to political and economic pressures, compromising their independence and editorial integrity. Simultaneously, the country is experiencing a concerning rise in Euroscepticism among its citizens, partly due to inadequate media coverage of EU-related issues and the proliferation of fake news. These challenges are compounded by a declining interest in journalism careers among young people, reflecting a broader crisis of confidence in the profession.

The project targets journalists and media professionals across all eight statistical regions of North Macedonia, with particular emphasis on young journalists and journalism students who represent the future of the profession. Additionally, civil society organizations working on media freedom and European integration will be engaged as crucial partners in strengthening the overall media ecosystem. Through this multi-stakeholder approach, the project aims to create lasting synergies between media professionals and civil society watchdogs, ultimately benefiting the broader citizenry by ensuring access to quality information about North Macedonia's EU accession process.

Media4EU is structured around five comprehensive work packages that combine research, capacity building, networking, and financial support mechanisms. The project begins with a thorough assessment phase that includes a survey of 1,000 citizens to measure public perceptions of EU integration reporting, alongside a self-assessment questionnaire for journalists to identify their specific needs and constraints.



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These findings will inform the design of targeted interventions and provide baseline data for measuring project impact at the conclusion of the three-year period. Throughout its implementation, the project emphasizes practical skills development in areas identified as weaknesses in North Macedonia's media landscape. Training modules will cover data journalism using tools like Eurostat, science journalism to bridge the gap between scientific communities and the public, investigative reporting techniques, digital literacy, and fact-checking methodologies to combat disinformation. These skills are essential not only for covering EU accession topics but for improving overall journalism quality and rebuilding public trust in media institutions.

Media4EU ultimately seeks to catalyze a transformation in how journalists cover EU integration processes and how citizens engage with this information. By strengthening professional capacities, fostering cross-border networks, supporting civil society watchdogs, and promoting ethical journalism practices, the project aims to contribute to both the quality of democratic discourse in North Macedonia and the country's preparedness for EU membership. The expected outcomes include more informed public debates about European integration, increased trust in media institutions, enhanced collaboration between journalists and civil society, and a new generation of media professionals equipped with the skills and values necessary to serve as guardians of democratic accountability in an increasingly complex information environment.



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REPORT ON THE NETWORKING CONFERENCE AND CAPACITY-BUILDING EVENT

The Networking Conference and Capacity-Building Event brought together media professionals, journalism educators, civil society representatives, local authorities, and EU experts in Skopje from 15th to 17th December 2025, to address critical challenges in journalism education and strengthen North Macedonia's media capacity as the country advances toward European Union membership. Organized within the framework of the Media4EU project by EUROTHINK - Center for European Strategies in partnership with ALDA and BIRC, with support from the European Union and the Central European Initiative, the three-day conference successfully created a platform for knowledge transfer, skills development, and sustainable partnership building between North Macedonian institutions and their EU counterparts.

The conference achieved its primary objectives of facilitating direct knowledge transfer on EU journalism education standards, providing practical training in EU reporting and investigative journalism, establishing concrete partnerships between North Macedonian and EU institutions, and strengthening collaboration among media professionals, educators, civil society, and local authorities. The strategic value of this conference extends beyond immediate outputs to encompass longer-term contributions to North Macedonia's democratic development and EU accession preparedness. By investing in journalism education as the foundation for media sector improvement, the conference adopted an approach that generates multiplier effects as trained educators influence successive generations of journalists. The partnerships established and commitments made during the conference provide frameworks for sustained collaboration that will continue strengthening North Macedonia's media capacity well beyond the Media4EU project timeframe.

1. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

North Macedonia's journey toward European Union membership has progressed across multiple policy chapters, with the country achieving important milestones in legislative harmonization and institutional reform. However, the media sector continues to face significant challenges that undermine its capacity to fulfill its democratic role of informing citizens, monitoring power, and facilitating public participation in governance processes. Despite constitutional protections for freedom of expression and specific legislation protecting press freedom, journalists encounter external pressures including strategic lawsuits, political interference, and economic constraints that compromise editorial independence and encourage self-censorship.



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These challenges are compounded by educational gaps in journalism training programs, which have struggled to keep pace with the rapidly evolving media landscape, the specific demands of covering EU integration processes, and emerging threats from disinformation and digital manipulation. While individual journalists may possess talent and commitment, the systemic weaknesses in journalism education limit the sector's overall capacity to achieve professional standards comparable to EU member states. Addressing these educational deficiencies represents a strategic entry point for generating sustainable improvements in media quality.

The timing of this conference in December 2025 was particularly significant, coinciding with the full implementation phase of the European Media Freedom Act, which entered into force in August 2025. This legislative framework establishes binding standards for media freedom, pluralism, and independence across Europe, creating both obligations and opportunities for candidate countries like North Macedonia to align their practices with European norms. The conference positioned North Macedonia's journalism community to proactively engage with these standards rather than reactively respond to compliance requirements.

2. CONFERENCE OBJECTIVES

The conference was designed to achieve several interconnected objectives. The primary goal was to facilitate direct knowledge transfer between established EU journalism schools and North Macedonian journalists, enabling participants to understand concrete standards, methodologies, and best practices that have proven successful in EU member states. This knowledge transfer encompassed both formal curriculum elements and practical pedagogical approaches for preparing students to navigate contemporary media challenges.

A second major objective was to provide intensive capacity building in specific competencies essential for quality journalism, particularly in relation to EU integration reporting. This included training in accessing and interpreting EU information sources and databases, fact-checking methodologies to combat disinformation, investigative journalism techniques for examining EU accession processes, and interview strategies for engaging with EU officials and experts. The emphasis on practical skills reflected recognition that North Macedonia's journalism challenges stem not from lacking awareness of democratic ideals but from concrete capability gaps. Finally, the conference aimed to strengthen collaboration among diverse stakeholders within North Macedonia's media ecosystem, including journalism educators, practicing media professionals, civil society organizations monitoring media freedom, and local authorities who constitute both sources and subjects of coverage. By bringing these actors together, the conference created opportunities for mutual understanding of respective roles, constraints, and potential synergies in supporting quality journalism.



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3. RELEVANCE TO MEDIA4EU PROJECT AND EU ACCESSION

This conference constituted a key component of the broader Media4EU project, which pursues comprehensive strengthening of media participation in North Macedonia's EU membership negotiation process through multiple interconnected interventions. The project combines baseline research to identify needs, targeted training programs, mentorship initiatives, study visits, civil society support through sub-grants, and convening events like this conference. Each element serves distinct strategic purposes while reinforcing others, creating cumulative impact greater than individual activities could achieve independently.

The conference's contribution to North Macedonia's EU accession process operates at multiple levels. Most directly, it strengthens the capacity of journalists and media organizations to cover EU integration topics with accuracy, depth, and relevance to citizens' concerns. Well-informed journalism about EU accession enables citizens to understand what membership entails, participate meaningfully in debates about integration priorities, and hold their government accountable for commitments made in negotiation processes. This informed public engagement represents an essential dimension of democratic preparedness for EU membership.

Beyond immediate improvements in EU coverage, the conference contributed to broader democratic institution strengthening that forms part of the criteria for EU accession. Quality journalism serves as a check on power, exposes corruption and maladministration, and creates space for public deliberation on policy choices. By investing in journalism education and professional development, the conference supported the democratic governance capacities that EU membership requires.

The emphasis on investigative journalism and fact-checking additionally addressed emerging security dimensions of accession preparedness, as resilience against disinformation and information manipulation becomes increasingly recognized as essential for protecting electoral integrity and maintaining social cohesion.



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4. CONFERENCE OVERVIEW

The Networking Conference and Capacity-Building Event took place over three days from 15th to 17th December 2025, at Hotel Karpos in Skopje, North Macedonia. The conference was organized within the framework of the Media4EU project by EUROTHINK - Center for European Strategies in partnership with ALDA (European Association for Local Democracy) and BIRC (Balkan Institute for Media and Democracy), with support from the European Union and the Central European Initiative. The event brought together thirty-five participants from North Macedonia, including journalism professors and lecturers, editors and senior journalists from various media outlets, representatives from civil society organizations, officials from local municipalities, and journalism students.

The conference featured international speakers and trainers who brought extensive expertise from EU member states and the Western Balkans region. Professors from the University of Ljubljana in Slovenia and the University of Bucharest in Romania shared insights on EU journalism education standards and quality assurance mechanisms. Media professionals and experts from Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina provided practical perspectives on EU reporting, investigative journalism, and fact-checking methodologies. These international trainers delivered intensive capacity-building sessions combining presentations, interactive workshops, and hands-on exercises, while also creating opportunities for North Macedonian participants to establish partnerships with EU institutions and build professional networks that will support ongoing collaboration beyond the conference.

The conference addressed critical topics essential for strengthening journalism capacity in the context of North Macedonia's EU accession process. Sessions focused on EU media education standards and the European Media Freedom Act, examining how journalism programs in EU member states structure the curriculum and equality through accreditation processes.

Participants engaged with practical case studies on EU reporting, learning how to cover European policies at national and local levels and how to communicate about EU-funded projects in ways that connect with citizens. Advanced sessions provided training in investigative journalism techniques for examining EU integration challenges, including methodologies for holding institutions accountable and uncovering implementation gaps. The final sessions equipped participants with practical tools for accessing EU information sources and databases, fact-checking EU-related content to combat disinformation, developing compelling story ideas that link EU policies to local impacts, and conducting effective interviews with EU officials and experts. Throughout all sessions, the conference emphasized not only individual skill development but also the importance of building sustainable partnerships between journalism,



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education, institutions, media organizations, civil society, and local authorities.

5. OPENING CEREMONY

The formal program began on 16th December with an opening ceremony featuring welcome remarks from Ms. **Katica Janeva**, Director of ALDA Balkans, Ms. **Antonella Valmorbida**, Secretary General of ALDA, and Mr. **Dimitar Nikolovski**, Executive Director of EUROTHINK - Centre for European Strategies.

Ms. Janeva emphasized the significance of the European Media Freedom Act, noting that as the Act comes into full application and EU accession negotiations demand stronger media capacities, the challenge of global disinformation makes the need for well-trained, independent, and ethical journalists greater than ever. She stressed that the event represents an investment in the future, in a democratic society, in informed citizens, and in the European perspective of North Macedonia.

Ms. Valmorbida highlighted the difficulties caused by media concentration and ownership, which often leave local outlets struggling and create media deserts where citizens lack access to quality local journalism. She posed critical questions about how people receive information if there is a media desert, and how local media can be used to share the challenges and opportunities of EU accession. She emphasized that if local media are empowered, they can provide not just more information, but good information based on data and the exchange of opinions. Mr. Nikolovski underlined the role of media in shaping public perceptions, stressing that citizens must be clearly informed about the requirements and tangible changes that European integration will bring to their daily lives. He noted that too often, the EU integration process is seen as bureaucratic and distant from citizens' realities. Through this project, the aim is to bring it closer to the ground level, enhancing local stories that connect directly to European integration.

6. PUBLIC SESSION: MEDIA, LOCAL AUTHORITIES AND EU INTEGRATION

The opening public session explored relationships among media, local authorities, and EU integration processes, bringing together perspectives from municipalities in North Macedonia and EU, journalism education institutions, civil society organizations, and media professionals. The session's public format served to raise broader awareness about the conference themes, and demonstrate commitment to media sector strengthening by bringing together diverse stakeholders from local government, academia, civil society, and media organizations.



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Mr. **Robert Jankulovski** from the Municipality of Karpos in Skopje discussed local government perspectives on media relations and the role of journalism in municipal governance. He emphasized the importance of transparency and improving communication between municipalities and media, particularly regarding EU-funded projects. Jankulovski highlighted that while municipalities implement numerous projects supported by EU pre-accession funds, citizens often remain unaware of this European dimension because project communication focuses on technical outputs rather than the EU contribution. He also presented how the Municipality communicates with its citizens and the media tools that they are using. He called for closer collaboration between municipalities and media to develop more effective communication strategies that help citizens understand how EU support is improving their communities.

Ms. **Cristina Goljka** from the Municipality of Rovinj in Croatia shared experiences from her country's accession process and the evolution of media-local government relationships as Croatia progressed from candidate status to EU membership. She noted that EU integration creates both opportunities and obligations for local authorities in terms of transparency, public participation, and accountability. EU funding programs require municipalities to meet specific standards for procurement, environmental assessment, and stakeholder consultation that often exceed previous national requirements.

Goljka emphasized that Croatian municipalities learned to view media not as adversaries or merely communication channels but as partners in engaging citizens with local governance. Journalists who understand municipal decision-making processes and constraints can explain complex issues to audiences more effectively than official communications alone. They can also identify gaps between policy intentions and implementation realities, providing valuable feedback for improving municipal performance. She shared local examples of the challenges that municipalities face, especially when dealing with the fast spread of information through social media and the need for municipalities to confirm or correct such information rapidly. She mentioned the example of the social media account "Rovinjnews" which is not an official municipal account but is managed by an ordinary citizen and very often confuses citizens about the information shared and its validity and relevance. Fake news represents a significant challenge for municipal administration, requiring careful monitoring of what is shared and quick responses with official statements. She encouraged North Macedonian municipalities to invest in building constructive relationships with local media and develop effective communication strategies as part of their EU integration preparation.



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Ms. **Jasna Bachovska-Nedikj** from the Faculty of Law at "Iustinianus Primus" University in Skopje provided an academic perspective on journalism education challenges and opportunities in North Macedonia. She described the structure of journalism programs at Macedonian universities, noting recent efforts to update curricula to address digital journalism, data analysis, and multimedia production. However, she acknowledged that resource constraints limit how quickly programs can adapt to technological changes and emerging professional demands. Universities struggle with limited budgets for equipment and software, difficulty attracting and retaining qualified faculty given salary levels, and challenges in attracting students. She shared her view that journalism in the country is facing significant challenges and losing its professionalism when it comes to communication. She also emphasized that communication is not only the responsibility of media but also of institutions themselves and how they present themselves in reality. For example, she noted that municipalities in Skopje don't have proper buildings and employees need to improve regular communication with citizens. Bachovska emphasized the importance of international partnerships in over coming these constraints. Collaboration with EU journalism schools can provide North Macedonian faculty with access to curriculum models, pedagogical resources, and professional development opportunities that individual institutions could not develop independently. Student exchange programs and joint research projects enable Macedonian academics to participate in knowledge production rather than only consuming research produced elsewhere.

Mr. **Xhelal Neziri**, President of the Balkan Institute for Regional Cooperation, addressed the issues that the media sector in North Macedonia is facing today. He talked about the duality of the role of media: the business aspect of their work and their role as public service informing citizens.

He highlighted that it is not surprising that, because of the lack of funding, media outlets turn more and more to the business agenda while compromising transparency. In today's reality, it is difficult for media to turn to their original mission and stay neutral, while also sharing accurate news and maintaining their priorities as democratic watchdogs.

Ms. **Vesna Kolovska**, editor-in-chief of Kanal 77, shared insights from the perspective of a practicing media professional, highlighting the everyday challenges of journalism in North Macedonia. Drawing on the example of the regional and local project in Sveti Nikole, she illustrated how information was communicated by local authorities and reported by the media, as well as how it was perceived by local citizens. She explained that the lack of timely, clear, and transparent information provided to the public led to frustration and distrust among citizens, who consequently expressed strong opposition to the project. This situation demonstrated not only shortcomings in institutional communication, but



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also a broader lack of media and civic literacy within the community. At the same time, the limited availability of verified information reduced media interest in the topic and constrained journalists' ability to provide accurate, relevant, and contextualized reporting. As a result, media coverage failed to fully inform citizens or support constructive public debate. She underlined that local media have a distinct responsibility compared to national outlets, as they are more closely connected to the communities they serve and are therefore expected to prioritize issues of direct local relevance, foster dialogue, and contribute to greater public understanding of local decision-making processes.

The public session generated rich discussion among panelists and audience members, touching on several recurring themes. Multiple speakers emphasized the interconnection between journalism quality and broader democratic governance, noting that well-functioning democracy depends on informed citizens, and informed citizens depend on quality journalism. Several participants highlighted the particular importance of local journalism, which often receives less attention than national media but plays a crucial role in municipal governance and community cohesion. The discussion also addressed generational challenges in journalism, with older professionals expressing concern about declining youth interest in the field while younger participants described obstacles they face entering and advancing in journalism careers.

7. SESSIONS - CAPACITY BUILDING FOR JOURNALISTS

SESSION 1: EU MEDIA EDUCATION STANDARDS: PROF. DR. MARKO MILOSAVLJEVIĆ – UNIVERSITY OF LJUBLJANA, BOGDAN OPREA, PHD, UNIVERSITY OF BUCHAREST

Mr. **Marko Milosavljević** from the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, delivered a session focusing on the EU journalism education framework and the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA). The session provided a critical overview of the current European approach to journalism education and its positioning within broader media regulation frameworks.

One of the key points highlighted during the lecture was that EMFA does not establish rules or standards related to journalism education. In fact, the Act barely refers to journalism itself, and even less to journalism education. Instead, EMFA primarily focuses on concepts such as "content services" and "media services", which, according to Prof. Milosavljević, significantly reduces the visibility and recognition of journalism as a profession with a specific democratic function. As a result, journalism education remains largely unacknowledged within EU-level media policies. The lecture further emphasized that there is no unified European or EU-wide model of journalism education. Educational systems and approaches differ significantly across European countries,



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reflecting diverse political, economic, and cultural contexts. Journalism education therefore faces country-specific challenges, as well as global pressures that affect the profession as a whole. Several key challenges for both media and journalism education were identified. These include unsustainable funding and business models, the growing influence of artificial intelligence in content production, and the rapid spread of disinformation. In addition, the position of journalism in society was discussed from an epistemological perspective, particularly the tension between the epistemology of journalism and the epistemology of science and formal education. This raises questions about credibility, knowledge production, and the role of journalists in democratic societies.

In relation to these observations, the current situation shows that while journalism education is increasingly confronted with market pressures and technological changes, its democratic importance is still not adequately reflected in European regulatory frameworks. This gap highlights the need for stronger recognition of journalism education as a public good and as a cornerstone of informed citizenship.

As part of the session on the EU journalism education framework, a lecture was delivered by Mr. **Bogdan Oprea**, PhD, from the University of Bucharest, focusing on the impact of digital platforms, automated online activity, and regulatory frameworks on journalism and journalism education in Europe. The lecture began with an overview of recent data on time spent online and on social media, drawing on insights from DataReportal, highlighting the increasing centrality of digital platforms in information consumption. The steady rise of automated traffic over recent years illustrates a growing structural challenge for journalism, including manipulation of public discourse, artificial amplification of content, and increased pressure on the credibility of online information.

Drawing on platform transparency reports, the lecture highlighted the growing scale of online manipulation, demonstrating how large-scale removal of fake accounts reflects structural vulnerabilities of the digital information space. These trends pose significant challenges for journalism, particularly in relation to credibility, audience trust, and content visibility. The discussion also addressed the risks faced by journalists, noting that professional threats are not limited to physical danger in conflict zones, but increasingly include harassment, intimidation, and psychosocial pressure within everyday working environments. Against this background, the Digital Services Act (DSA) was introduced as an important EU regulatory framework designed to improve online safety, platform responsibility, and transparency. The lecturer underlined its



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relevance for journalism education, as regulatory awareness becomes an essential competence for future media professionals. The session concluded with an overview of current EU support mechanisms for media, including media councils, ownership monitoring systems, journalist protection mechanisms, media pluralism monitoring, and funding instruments under Creative Europe. In this context, several recommendations were highlighted for journalism education institutions: stronger participation in European university alliances, enhanced cooperation between media schools, NGOs and newsrooms, public support for journalists under pressure, and partnerships with pre-university institutions to promote media literacy.

SESSION 2:

"MEDIA FOR EU" - EUROPEAN CASE STUDIES DELIVERED BY DRAGAN NIKOLIC, DEPUTY HEAD THE EUROPE FUTURE CENTRE AND MEMBER OF THE FOREIGN POLICY FORUM IN CROATIA

This session presented the Croatian experience of media coverage of European Union policies and its EU integration process, using it as an illustrative example of how journalism shapes public understanding of complex political and institutional developments.

Mr. **Dragan Nikolic** focused on the role of journalists during different phases of Croatia EU accession process and after membership, highlighting common patterns in media narratives and reporting practices. The presentation underlined that EU integration is not only a legal or administrative process, but also a communication process in which media act as key intermediaries between institutions and citizens. The Croatian case was presented to illustrate broader challenges that can emerge in both candidate countries and EU Member States.

The speaker described how Croatian media coverage evolved throughout the accession process, starting with optimistic narratives during the application phase, followed by reduced public interest and media fatigue during negotiations, and culminating in rushed and reactive reporting ahead of the accession referendum. Media narratives frequently framed the EU as an external actor exerting pressure or imposing conditions, rather than as a shared political and policy framework. Several thematic areas were highlighted to demonstrate these dynamics, including rule of law, competition policy, agriculture, environmental protection, and migration. In these areas, reporting focused primarily on political events, conflicts, and individual cases, while providing limited explanation of policy frameworks, regulatory objectives, and long-term impacts. Topics perceived as technically complex or less newsworthy—such as environmental infrastructure and regulatory reform received comparatively low and superficial media attention, despite their relevance for citizens' daily lives.



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The presentation also addressed media practices after Croatia's accession to the EU. According to the speaker, EU-related topics largely disappeared from prominent media coverage once membership was achieved. EU affairs continued to be treated as external or foreign issues, even though EU legislation increasingly influenced domestic policies. Reporting on EU-funded projects focused mainly on visible outcomes and financial figures, with limited follow-up on implementation, impact, or accountability, except in cases involving major controversies or corruption allegations.

The session concluded that the Croatian example demonstrates structural limitations in how complex political processes are communicated through the media. Event-driven and conflict-oriented reporting dominates over explanatory and contextual journalism, limiting citizens' ability to understand policies, reforms, and their long-term consequences. A key point from the presentation was that effective journalism on EU-related topics must prioritise citizens' perspectives and everyday realities, rather than institutional processes alone. Without continuous, accessible, and contextualised reporting, public engagement declines and complex policy frameworks risk being perceived as distant or elite driven. The speaker emphasised that the Croatian experience offers relevant lessons for media practitioners, civil society organisations, and policymakers, highlighting the importance of strengthening explanatory reporting, policy literacy, and sustained media attention to ensure informed public debate and accountability beyond major political milestones.

SESSION 3: INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM ON EU INTEGRATION DELIVERED BY SELMA UCANBARLIC, INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALIST & STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS SPECIALIST

The workshop on Investigative Journalism on EU Integration, led by Ms. **Selma Učanbarlić**, provided participants with a clearer understanding of how local challenges can be transformed into impactful investigative stories that directly engage with the EU integration process. The workshop emphasized that investigative journalism is not only about exposing isolated local problems, but about uncovering the deeper systemic failures that prevent the implementation of genuine European standards. The session began by encouraging participants to identify pressing local issues such as environmental degradation, corruption in urban planning, youth emigration, and the poor quality of public services, and to critically examine how these problems are linked to stalled reforms, weak rule of law, and state capture. Particular attention was given to areas central to EU integration, including judicial independence, public finance, legislative alignment, and media integrity.



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The key takeaway was that many reforms exist only on paper, creating "cosmetic laws" that satisfy formal EU requirements without delivering real change on the ground.

A central message of the workshop was that the role of investigative journalists begins where government public relations narratives end. Instead of reproducing official statements, journalists must focus on the gap between promises and reality, paying close attention to what is deliberately omitted from official documents. The group was divided into five mini-groups and each was asked to select one major challenge at the local level, create a hypothesis regarding the issue, and choose several sources for research. Most groups selected the problem with public transport as their case study.

Participants were also guided through key investigative steps including defining a precise local problem that signals a broader systemic failure, formulating a clear investigative hypothesis, and identifying reliable public data sources. The importance of "connecting the dots" through mapping actors, triple-checking information, and using EU progress reports as verification tools was strongly emphasized. Finally, the workshop highlighted the need to humanize investigative stories and frame narratives strategically, positioning journalists as architects of accountability rather than passive observers.

SESSION 4: PRACTICAL TOOLS FOR EU REPORTING: DEJAN SHAJINOVIC, MEDIA CENTER, SARAJEVO

The training session on Practical Tools for EU Reporting, led by Mr. **Dejan Shajinovic** aimed to strengthen participants' understanding of professional standards, sources, and analytical approaches required for accurate and credible reporting on EU integration processes.

The first part of the session focused on the core principles of quality journalism in the context of EU reporting. Key themes included integrity, credibility, accuracy, transparency, and the clear distinction between facts, interpretation, and opinion. Participants were introduced to practical guidance on avoiding sensationalism, prioritizing precision over impact, acknowledging uncertainty, and correcting mistakes when necessary. Emphasis was also placed on the importance of seeking expert support and effectively using technology and verified data sources without compromising journalistic quality.

The session further provided an overview of essential tools and sources for EU reporting. These included official EU institutional sources such as the European Commission, the Council of the EU, the European Parliament, the Official Journal of the EU, and EU Delegations, as well as other official and semi-official sources, including EU officials, spokespersons, Members of the



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European Parliament, and institutional experts. Additional attention was given to the use of credible public sources, think-tank publications, conferences, and cooperation with fellow journalists, academics, and sectoral experts.

To translate theory into practice, the final 30 minutes of the session were dedicated to an interactive exercise. Participants actively engaged in role-play simulation of a press conference, assuming the role of journalists asking questions related to EU-linked political, economic, security, and rule-of- law scenarios presented during the training. The exercise required participants to apply the tools and principles discussed earlier, formulate relevant and critical questions, and demonstrate an understanding of EU obligations, policies, and broader geopolitical contexts.

The practical exercise proved to be highly engaging and generated active participation, critical thinking, and dynamic discussion among participants. Overall, the session contributed to enhanced capacities for informed, responsible, and context-sensitive reporting on EU integration issues, combining conceptual knowledge with hands-on journalistic practice.

8. CLOSING SESSION

The conference concluded on 17th December with a closing session featuring certificate presentations and farewell remarks from the organizers. Certificates were awarded to all participants in recognition of their active engagement throughout the three-day program and their commitment to strengthening journalism standards in North Macedonia. The certificates provided tangible documentation of participants' professional development while symbolizing their membership in a growing network of media professionals, educators, and civil society representatives dedicated to quality journalism.



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CONCLUSIONS AND KEY TAKEAWAYS

The Networking Conference and Capacity-Building Event successfully brought together thirty-five media professionals, journalism educators, civil society representatives, and local government officials for three intensive days of learning, exchange, and partnership building. The following key takeaways emerged from the sessions and discussions:

ON JOURNALISM EDUCATION:

- There is no unified EU-wide model of journalism education; systems differ significantly across European countries, reflecting diverse contexts and approaches
- The European Media Freedom Act (EMFA) primarily focuses on regulating media services, protecting editorial independence, safeguarding media pluralism, and protecting journalists and their sources, rather than on journalism education or professional training *per se*
- Resource constraints in North Macedonia limit how quickly journalism programs can adapt to technological changes and professional demands
- International partnerships with EU institutions provide crucial access to curriculum models, pedagogical resources, and professional development opportunities
- Student exchanges and joint research projects enable North Macedonian academics to participate in knowledge production rather than only consuming research from elsewhere

ON EU REPORTING:

- Effective EU reporting must prioritize citizens' perspectives and everyday realities, not just institutional processes
- Event-driven and conflict-oriented reporting dominates over explanatory and contextual limiting citizens' ability to understand policies and their long-term journalism consequences
- The Croatian experience shows that EU topics often disappear from media coverage after accession, even though EU legislation continues to influence domestic policies
- Journalists must move beyond reproducing official statements to examine the gap between policy promises and implementation realities
- Local stories that connect directly to European integration bring the process closer to citizens and counter perceptions of the EU as bureaucratic and distant



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ON INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM:

- Many reforms exist only on paper, creating "cosmetic laws" that satisfy formal EU requirements without delivering real change on the ground
- The role of investigative journalists begins where government public relations narratives end
- Local problems such as environmental degradation, corruption in urban planning, and poor public services are often linked to stalled reforms, weak rule of law, and state capture
- Investigative stories must connect the dots through mapping actors, triple-checking information, and using EU progress reports as verification tools
- Journalists should position themselves as architects of accountability rather than passive observers

ON PRACTICAL TOOLS AND STANDARDS:

- Quality journalism requires integrity, credibility, accuracy, transparency, and clear distinction between facts, interpretation, and opinion
- Journalists must prioritize precision over sensationalism and acknowledge uncertainty when necessary
- Essential sources include EU institutional platforms, official documents, think-tank publications, and cooperation with fellow journalists and experts
- Access to EU databases and information sources is crucial but often underutilized by journalists
- Fact-checking EU-related content is essential for combating disinformation and building public trust

ON MEDIA-LOCAL AUTHORITY RELATIONS:

- Local authorities and media must collaborate more effectively to communicate about EU integration processes
- Municipalities implement numerous EU-funded projects but citizens often remain unaware of the European dimension
- The rapid spread of information through social media requires municipalities to confirm or correct information quickly
- Fake news and unofficial social media accounts managed by ordinary citizens confuse the public about information validity
- Journalists who understand municipal decision-making processes can explain complex issues more effectively than official communications alone



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ON REGIONAL COOPERATION:

- Western Balkan countries share common legacies and comparable obstacles in their EU accession processes
- Regional cooperation strengthens collective capacity to meet EU standards and should be viewed as complementary to European integration
- Cross-border investigative journalism collaborations can effectively examine issues such as organized crime, environmental degradation, and migration
- Peer learning among countries at similar development stages is particularly valuable because participants understand each other's contexts

FINAL REFLECTION:

The conference demonstrated that strengthening journalism in North Macedonia requires simultaneous action on multiple fronts: improving education programs, developing professional skills, building sustainable funding models, advocating for legal protections, fostering international partnerships, and enhancing public appreciation for journalism's democratic role. No single intervention can transform the media sector, but strategic investments in education and capacity building create foundations for gradual, sustainable improvement. The commitment and engagement demonstrated by participants throughout the three days signals significant potential for positive change, provided that momentum is sustained through concrete follow-up actions by all stakeholders.



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ORGANIZATIONAL PARTNERS

EUROTHINK - Center for European Strategies served as the lead organizer, bringing two decades of experience in capacity building for civil society, media, and public administration on European integration topics. As project leader for Media4EU, EUROTHINK contributed organizational expertise, local networks, and deep understanding of North Macedonia's media landscape and EU accession challenges. The organization's established credibility among stakeholders facilitated recruitment of high-quality participants and ensured that conference design aligned with genuine needs rather than external assumptions.

ALDA - the European Association for Local Democracy brought extensive networks across EU and candidate countries, expertise in fostering cooperation among local authorities and civil society, and experience implementing European projects in the Balkans. ALDA's operational office in Skopje, established in 2012, provided local presence and knowledge while the organization's European connections enabled recruitment of international experts and positioning of the conference within broader regional and European initiatives.

BIRC - the Balkan Institute for Regional Cooperation contributed specialized expertise in media development and regional networking among journalism professionals. The organization's focus on media literacy, professional standards, and cross-border collaboration complemented EUROTHINK's EU integration emphasis and ALDA's local democracy expertise, creating a comprehensive approach to the media sector's multifaceted challenges.

Support from the **European Union** and the **Central European Initiative** (CEI) provided both financial resources and political legitimacy that enhanced the conference's strategic significance. EU involvement signaled recognition of media capacity building as an important dimension of enlargement policy, while CEI engagement reinforced regional cooperation frameworks that extend beyond bilateral relationships to encompass peer learning among countries at similar development stages.



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