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# USAID/OTI MACEDONIA SUPPORT INITIATIVE

SEMI-ANNUAL REPORT

NOVEMBER 1, 2016 – APRIL 30, 2017

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# USAID/OTI MACEDONIA SUPPORT INITIATIVE

## SEMI-ANNUAL REPORT

NOVEMBER 1, 2016 – APRIL 30, 2017

**Submitted to:**

USAID Office of Transition Initiatives

**Prepared by:**

AECOM International Development

**DISCLAIMER:**

The authors' views expressed in this document do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Agency for International Development or the United States Government.

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## INTRODUCTION

In 2015, Macedonia's four major political parties requested the European Union (EU) and the United States Government (USG) help Macedonia resolve its political crisis. To assist with this process, USAID launched the USAID/OTI Macedonia Support Initiative (MSI) in September 2015 to support the key reform processes outlined in the Przino Agreement. In December 2015, USAID increased its support to Macedonia by expanding this initiative to a full program, implemented by AECOM International Development. MSI is a two-year program with a base contract ceiling of approximately US\$8,495,000.

From November 2016 to April 2017, the program worked to:

- Increase demand for a more moderate media environment,
- Expand civic engagement, and
- Improve issue advocacy,

Through the implementation of MSI, USAID/OTI works closely with civil society organizations, media groups, and government institutions to increase access to reliable information, promote free and open civic discourse, and support democratic reforms.

## POLITICAL CONTEXT

Ahead of parliamentary elections on December 11, 2016, the European Commission deemed the political crisis in Macedonia the “most severe...since 2001”<sup>1</sup> when armed conflict gripped the country. Following the elections, Macedonia's political space has continued to narrow. The 2017 “Nations in Transit” (NIT) report by Freedom House lowered Macedonia's democracy score<sup>2</sup> from the previous year due to “further escalation of the political crisis caused by presidential pardons, lack of political dialogue, and controversial and conflictual functioning of national political institutions.”<sup>3</sup>

In its Election Observation Mission Final Report, the OSCE noted the pre-election campaign period was positive overall; however, negative rhetoric and nationalist messages were present among the major parties.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, the post-election period has been “marked by a tense atmosphere and some harsh rhetoric” after no political party won a 61-seat majority of parliament in national elections.<sup>5</sup> The incumbent Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization - Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE) party won 51 seats to the main opposition Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) party's 49 seats. On January 9, President Gjorge Ivanov issued the mandate to former Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski of VMRO-DPMNE to establish a coalition government within 20 days.

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<sup>1</sup> COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia 2016 Report. Rep. European Commission, 9 Nov. 2016. Web. 4. <[https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/pdf/key\\_documents/2016/20161109\\_report\\_the\\_former\\_yugoslav\\_republic\\_of\\_macedonia.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/pdf/key_documents/2016/20161109_report_the_former_yugoslav_republic_of_macedonia.pdf)>.

<sup>2</sup> The Nations in Transit Democracy score averages ratings across seven categories: national democratic governance, electoral process, civil society, independent media, local democratic governance, judicial framework and independence, and corruption.

<sup>3</sup> “Macedonia.” Macedonia | Country Report | Nations in Transit | 2017. Freedom House, n.d. Web. <<https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2017/macedonia>>.

<sup>4</sup> The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia Early Parliamentary Elections 11 December 2016: Election Observation Mission Final Report . Rep. OSCE/ODIHR, 28 Feb. 2017. Web. <<http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/fyrom/302136?download=true>>

<sup>5</sup> The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia Early Parliamentary Elections 11 December 2016: Election Observation Mission Final Report . Rep. OSCE/ODIHR, 28 Feb. 2017. Web. <<http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/fyrom/302136?download=true>>

With neither VMRO-DPMNE nor SDSM earning a majority of seats in Parliament, coalition building with Albanian parties became a decisive factor in any party's ability to form a government. Votes in the Albanian bloc, which have traditionally gone to two parties, were instead fragmented across several emerging parties. In early January 2017, the major Albanian parties met in Tirana to agree on conditions for entering into a coalition government. The resulting "Albanian Platform" defined seven key points intended to improve conditions for Albanians living in Macedonia.<sup>6</sup> Agreement to implement the platform became a prerequisite for Albanian parties to join a coalition with either VMRO-DPMNE or SDSM. VMRO-DPMNE began discussions with its previous coalition partner and senior Albanian party, the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), to renew their alliance. On January 29, the deadline for the mandate passed and DUI announced that no coalition had been formed. Following the announcement, VMRO-DPMNE issued a statement accusing foreign governments of intervening in the political process in Macedonia and calling for new elections to resolve the crisis.<sup>7</sup>

Shortly after, President Ivanov announced he would not issue the mandate until a party provided proof of a clear majority in Parliament.<sup>8</sup> SDSM began talks with several Albanian parties, including DUI, to form a coalition and agreed to the terms of the Albanian platform. In late February, the leader of SDSM, Zoran Zaev, presented evidence of a 67-seat majority formed with multiple Albanian parties. President Ivanov refused to issue the mandate to SDSM, claiming that the Albanian platform poses a threat to Macedonia.<sup>9</sup> Foreign leaders from the U.S., EU, and other nations publically urged Ivanov to honor the political process and end the crisis by awarding the mandate to form a government to the party which had succeeded in establishing a coalition.

Formed in the wake of the elections, civic initiative "For a United Macedonia," organized protests beginning in February 2017 using nationalist rhetoric to speak out against the formation of a coalition government and the adoption of the Albanian Platform; the protests continue as of this writing.<sup>10</sup> In March 2017, VMRO-DPMNE released a statement demanding new parliamentary elections to be held alongside local elections saying, "...the final judgment regarding the [Albanian] platform should be given to the citizens. They didn't vote in December for all of these elements in the platform. The local elections are near and the best solution for this crisis is for Zoran Zaev to raise his courage and agree to present the platform in front of the citizens."<sup>11</sup>

On April 27, approximately 200 "For a United Macedonia" supporters, some masked,<sup>12</sup> stormed Parliament to protest the election of a new speaker, DUI MP Talaat Xhaferi, an act they viewed as a coup attempt.<sup>13</sup> Live video feeds quickly circulated online of a bloodied Zoran Zaev surrounded by protestors. Alliance for Albanians leader, Ziadin Sela was also reportedly beaten and was considered the

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<sup>6</sup> Marusic, Sinisa Jakov. "Timeline: Power Battle Leaves Macedonia Without Government." Balkan Insight. N.p., 3 Apr. 2017. Web. <<http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/timeline-power-battle-leaves-macedonia-without-government-03-30-2017>>.

<sup>7</sup> Marusic, Sinisa Jakov. "Macedonia's Gruevski Fails to Form New Govt." Balkan Insight. N.p., 30 Jan. 2017. Web. <<http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/macedonia-s-gruevski-fails-to-form-new-govt--01-30-2017>>.

<sup>8</sup> Marusic, "Timeline: Power Battle Leaves Macedonia Without Government."

<sup>9</sup> "Scared in Skopje: A Macedonian Breakdown Gets Europe's Attention." The Economist. N.p., 9 Mar. 2017. Web. <<http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21718549-tensions-countrys-albanian-politicians-could-deteriorate-conflict-macedonian>>.

<sup>10</sup> Marusic, Sinisa Jakov. "Protesters Vow More Rallies Against New Macedonia Govt." Balkan Insight. N.p., 27 Feb. 2017. Web. <<http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/people-march-against-sdsm-led-macedonia-govt-02-27-2017>>.

<sup>11</sup> "VMRO-DPMNE demands new parliamentary elections alongside local elections Meta.mk." Meta.mk. N.p., 5 Mar. 2017. Web. <<http://meta.mk/en/vmro-dpmne-demands-new-parliamentary-elections-along-with-the-local/>>.

<sup>12</sup> "Macedonia Parliament stormed by protesters in Skopje" BBC. N.p 28 Apr. 2017. Web. <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-39738865>>

<sup>13</sup> Marusic, Sinisa Jakov "Macedonia shaken by violence in parliament". Balkan Insight. N.p. 28 Apr. 2017. Web <<http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/macedonia-calms-down-after-parliament-violence-04-27-2017>>

most seriously injured.<sup>14</sup> <sup>15</sup> The political violence drew condemnation from US and EU representatives, while both SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE placed responsibility on the other for inciting violence.<sup>16</sup> <sup>17</sup> More than 100 people are believed to have been treated for injuries related to the violence, and police have filed criminal charges against 15 people suspected to be involved.<sup>18</sup>

The Freedom House NIT report identifies Macedonia's ability to establish "a stable, reform-oriented government" as necessary to its "further democratization and path towards EU integration."<sup>19</sup> The post-election events underscore the complexity of this process. As the March 6 deadline for setting a date for local elections has passed and attempts to break the political deadlock have been unsuccessful, it remains unclear if local elections conceived for Spring 2017 will move forward.<sup>20</sup>

## MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

The media remains subject to intense political pressure that limits the freedom of the press. Freedom House categorized Macedonia's media environment as "Not Free," having one of the steepest declines from the previous year of all countries evaluated in its 2016 Freedom of Press report. It cited the government's "liberal use of promotional advertising" for "[increasing] the media's financial dependence and [favoring] pro-government outlets."<sup>21</sup> The report echoed a 2015 report by the European Commission Senior Experts' Group, which highlighted the "unhealthy relationship between the mainstream media and top government officials, with the former seemingly taking direct orders from the latter on both basic and fundamental issues of editorial policy."<sup>22</sup> The divisions and pressure in the media landscape limits space for diverse narratives and critical reporting to inform the Macedonian public, resulting in a dearth of content that discusses issues through a non-partisan lens and programs that promote constructive and inclusive dialogue on political and social issues.

The media environment grew more hostile in the lead up to the contentious national elections and the subsequent political deadlock and civil unrest.<sup>23</sup> <sup>24</sup> On February 28, two journalists were attacked and

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<sup>14</sup> Testorides, Konstantin. "Protesters attack Macedonian lawmakers over leadership vote". N.p. 27 Apr 2017. Web. <[https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/macedonian-opposition-head-calls-for-end-to-deadlock/2017/04/27/f57127d6-2b5e-11e7-9081-f5405f56d3e4\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.17e57d27e957](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/macedonian-opposition-head-calls-for-end-to-deadlock/2017/04/27/f57127d6-2b5e-11e7-9081-f5405f56d3e4_story.html?utm_term=.17e57d27e957)>

<sup>15</sup> "Protesters attack lawmakers after storming Macedonia's Parliament". Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty. N.p. 2017 Apr 28. Web. <<https://www.rferl.org/a/macedonian-parliament-stormed-zaev-injured-beaten-vmro-dpmne/28455833.html?>

<sup>16</sup> Marusic, Sinisa Jakov "Macedonia shaken by violence in parliament"

<sup>17</sup> Testorides, Konstantin, and Elena Becatoros. "Macedonian violence elicits diverging international response". Associated Press. N.p. 28 Apr 2017. Web. <<http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/eu-violence-macedonia-amid-political-crisis-unacceptable-47075549>>

<sup>18</sup> "15 charged in attack on Macedonian parliament that hurt 100". Associated Press. N.p. 30 Apr. 2017. Web. <[https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/15-charged-in-attack-on-macedonian-parliament-that-hurt-100/2017/04/30/307b52c6-2dbb-11e7-a335-fa0ae1940305\\_story.html?tid=hybrid\\_collaborative\\_2\\_na&utm\\_term=.de3cb3c43585](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/15-charged-in-attack-on-macedonian-parliament-that-hurt-100/2017/04/30/307b52c6-2dbb-11e7-a335-fa0ae1940305_story.html?tid=hybrid_collaborative_2_na&utm_term=.de3cb3c43585)>

<sup>19</sup> "Macedonia." Macedonia | Country Report | Nations in Transit | 2017. Freedom House, n.d. Web. <<https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2017/macedonia>>.

<sup>20</sup> Marusic, Sinisa Jakov. "Macedonia's Crisis Could Cripple local Councils." Balkan Insight. N.p. 30 Mar. 2017. <<http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/macedonia-s-crisis-may-cripple-municipalities-03-07-2017>>

<sup>21</sup> "Macedonia Freedom of the Press 2016." Freedom House, n.d. Web. <<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2016/macedonia>>

<sup>22</sup> The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia: Recommendations of the Senior Experts' Group on systemic Rule of Law issues relating to the communications interception revealed in Spring 2015. Rep. European Commission, 8 June 2015. Web. < [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/news\\_corner/news/news-files/20150619\\_recommendations\\_of\\_the\\_senior\\_experts\\_group.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/news_corner/news/news-files/20150619_recommendations_of_the_senior_experts_group.pdf)>

<sup>23</sup> "Western Balkans: Unchecked Attacks on Media." Human Rights Watch. N.p., 30 Nov. 2016. Web. <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/11/30/western-balkans-unchecked-attacks-media>>.

<sup>24</sup> "Journalists repeatedly attacked in Macedonian political crisis." Reporters without Borders. N.p., 08 Mar. 2017. Web. <<https://rsf.org/en/news/journalists-repeatedly-attacked-macedonian-political-crisis>>

their equipment destroyed while covering pro-VMRO-DPMNE demonstrations. Prominent journalists who commented on the attack were called “traitors” and “mercenaries” and reported several instances of intimidation.<sup>25</sup> All major political parties condemned the attacks. Two months later on April 27, violent protestors attacked at least ten journalists as they stormed Parliament, two of whom were brought to the hospital suffering head and face injuries.<sup>26</sup>

The Association of Journalists in Macedonia (ZNM) pointed to the long-held “impunity for violence against journalists that the government is fostering in the last five years” for encouraging the attacks. No suspects have been identified or prosecuted for “any of the 30 attacks on journalists the [ZNM] registered in the past four years.”<sup>27</sup> <sup>28</sup> A joint statement by the Western Balkans Regional Platform for Advocating Media Freedom and Journalists Safety, the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF), European Federation of Journalists (EFJ), South East Europe Media Organization (SEEMO), and Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa (OBCT) echoed the ZNM’s sentiment following a fact-finding mission, while also pointing to “the political climate, anti-media rhetoric and polarization” and lack of political will to ensure conditions for free and independent journalism as root causes of the increased violence against journalists in Macedonia.<sup>29</sup>

An open and diverse media environment is more crucial now than ever, as communities around the globe confront the rise of “fake news” which threatens how citizens understand issues. The small town of Veles in Macedonia gained notoriety in 2016 as residents played a central role in the proliferation of false news stories on social media during the U.S. presidential elections.<sup>30</sup> The country’s own parliamentary elections also confronted “fake news.” One investigative journalist identified domains churning out anti-opposition fake news that were registered outside of Macedonia.<sup>31</sup>

## PROGRAM STRATEGY

The Macedonia Support Initiative creates space for inclusive and pluralistic civic engagement in a narrowing political environment. Through this goal, the program seeks to directly contribute to U.S. foreign policy interests to strengthen Macedonia’s democratic reform process and resume the country’s trajectory to EU and NATO membership. MSI utilizes an iterative learning model to continually refine its strategic approach based on lessons learned and changes in the environment. Through small awards, both grants and contracts, MSI supports local partners to implement projects aligned with two programmatic objectives:

1. **Media programming that increase citizens’ access to a diversified, robust media landscape.** Many citizens’ viewpoints are unrepresented in Macedonia’s current media

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<sup>25</sup> “Smear Campaign Targets BIRN Journalists in Macedonia.” Balkan Insight. N.p., 01 Mar. 2017. Web.

<<http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/smear-campaign-targets-birn-journalists-in-macedonia-03-01-2017>>

<sup>26</sup> “Macedonia: two journalists injured during storming of the Parliament.” European Federation of Journalists. N.p. 28 Apr. 2017. Web. <<http://europeanjournalists.org/blog/2017/04/28/macedonia-two-journalists-injured-during-storming-of-the-parliament/>>

<sup>27</sup> “Western Balkans: Unchecked Attacks on Media.” Human Rights Watch. N.p., 30 Nov. 2016. Web. <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/11/30/western-balkans-unchecked-attacks-media>>.

<sup>28</sup> “Macedonia: journalists attacked during protest.” European Federation of Journalists. N.p., 3 Jan. 2017. Web. <<http://europeanjournalists.org/blog/2017/03/01/macedonia-journalists-attacked-during-protest/>>.

<sup>29</sup> “Macedonia: It is high time to stop violence against journalists!” European Federation of Journalists. N.p. 28 Apr. 2017. Web. <<http://europeanjournalists.org/blog/2017/04/28/macedonia-two-journalists-injured-during-storming-of-the-parliament/>>

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/aug/24/facebook-clickbait-political-news-sites-us-election-trump>

<sup>31</sup> Kirby, Emma Jane, “The city getting rich from fake news”. BBC. N.p. 5 Dec 2016. Web. <<http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-3816828>>

offerings. MSI supports a broad selection of media content and products that increase exposure to a diversity of perspectives and expand access to a diversified, robust media landscape.

- 2. Activities that increase the capacity of civic actors to engage effectively in their communities.** Capacity and narrowing spaces are major impediments to effective mobilization of Macedonian citizens and articulation of community priorities. MSI supports key civic actors to increase their resilience to maneuver closing spaces and expand local level civic action.

**Figure 1. Distribution across objectives of MSI activities cleared during the reporting period**



\*Retired Clusters include raising awareness of and supporting institutions implementing key reforms detailed in the Prizno Agreement; improving issue advocacy; and building citizen capacity by equipping citizens with the information needed to constructively engage with government officials on issues of critical importance

## DEBATE PROGRAMS ENCOURAGE OPEN DIALOGUE

Public debate remains central to a healthy democracy to encourage citizens to be more active participants in the decision-making process. According to the OSCE Final Report, “there were almost no debates between political leaders or candidates heading the lists either in the districts or at the national level” due to candidates’ refusal to participate.<sup>32</sup> To promote constructive dialogue about issues relevant to their daily lives, MSI supports TV and radio debate platforms featuring guests with diverse backgrounds, affiliations, and viewpoints.

Between April 2016 and January 2017, MSI partnered with radio station, Kanal 77, to produce and air two seasons of a “radio-vision” debate platform called “Night Express,” which presented balanced, non-partisan information to the Macedonian public. Over 60 live shows, more than 400 guests from across the political spectrum, ranging from politicians, journalists, professors, civil society leaders, and political analysts, presented their views and engaged in valuable discussions on key issues including workers’ rights, corruption in the healthcare industry, and Macedonia’s political outlook. The show also amplified the messages of 26 MSI grantees as a space to discuss their activities on air. Macedonian citizens were encouraged to call in live to engage with guests on these topics and 76% of listeners surveyed said they considered the topics discussed to be relevant to them and the wider public.

In November 2016, MSI began supporting the televised debate program, “Click Plus,” airing on national Albanian television station, TV21. The show has become a credible brand in the media, drawing audiences and guests with its non-partisan and inclusive approach to hosting debates on key issues. Each week, the show features influential figures in Macedonia, including politicians from each of the major parties. In addition to hosting SDSM officials, one of its most successful episodes included a senior official from VMRO-DPMNE who discussed the process for forming of a new government. The appearance marked the first time in several years that a high-ranking member of the ruling party had joined a debate on an independent platform. The senior official’s attendance on Click Plus initiated a

<sup>32</sup> OSCE/ODHIR, “Election Observation Mission Final Report”



series of appearances by VMRO-DPMNE officials on other non-government-affiliated TV programs, demonstrating party officials' increased interest in speaking to a broader swath of Macedonia citizenry.



*CLICK PLUS GUESTS DISCUSS THE POST-ELECTION POLITICAL CRISIS AND THE ROLE OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY IN FINDING SOLUTIONS.  
PHOTO: USAID/OTI MSI*

Since partnering with MSI, the show has seen a 100 percent increase in viewership compared with previous seasons. Click Plus has also expanded its ability to bridge ethnic divides in debate programming; with MSI support, the originally Albanian-language show on the primarily Albanian-language station TV21 allowed for the addition of Macedonian-language episodes. The show now airs episodes twice in Albanian and twice in Macedonian each week. As a result, it has grown in popularity amongst Macedonian speakers who often watch the episodes livestreamed on Facebook. Between February and March, the show saw an 80% increase in online viewership on Facebook, highlighting the importance of the medium for disseminating balanced, diverse information.

Operating within a deeply polarized media sphere, Kanal 77 and Click Plus offer much-needed platforms that foster meaningful dialogue and expose audiences to a diversity of perspectives and views.

## **INDEPENDENT MEDIA INSPIRES CIVIC ACTION**

From October 2016 through April 2017, MSI supported Nova TV, an increasingly influential, independent news platform in Macedonia. Nova TV produces and broadcasts over 400 well-researched, balanced, fact-based online news stories and media content. The products included daily one-minute news videos, investigative stories, and portraits of everyday citizens. The portrait series has attracted a wider audience across Macedonia for its focus on non-partisan, community-level issues and how citizens are taking action to resolve them. One of the most successful portraits airing in January 2017 shared the story of a young, unemployed couple and their infant son living on the margins. Their household had been without electricity for over a year and they had accumulated \$6,000 in unpaid bills. The family petitioned for government support, but was told they did not qualify. Within one week of posting, the family's story had been seen more than 20,000 times and ordinary citizens had donated enough money to turn their electricity on again. Job offers poured in and provided a long-term solution for the family's financial needs. Nova TV's portrait of the young family brought this story to public consciousness and inspired Macedonians to lend a hand to their fellow citizens and call on government institutions to do more to support people on the margins. The portrait video received more engagement on social media than any other news outlet in the country in the month of January, and underscored the power of information and storytelling in motivating civic action.

## **GRANTS SUMMARY**

Between November 2016 and April 2017, MSI cleared 12 activities, bringing the total number of activities cleared, closed, and completed to date to 45. The median activity size during this period was approximately \$90,000 and the largest was \$434,323. MSI cleared the highest number of activities in November and February. The program cleared the fewest activities and obligated the least funds in December, largely due to the holiday season, but maintained steady disbursements throughout the

reporting period. In the following month, January 2017, MSI committed the most funds in the reporting period, including its largest activity to date.

## **CONCLUSION**

Between November 2016 and April 2017, the Macedonia Support Initiative and its partners leveraged citizens' desire for more pluralistic discourse and their readiness to participate in small ways to develop and grow spaces for engagement on issues of importance in the face of increasing political pressure and polarization. MSI activities have diversified the media landscape by introducing engaging, non-partisan content in a variety of new and reinvigorated formats including debate, satire, documentaries, and short videos. These platforms have proved to be a springboard for civic engagement on issues of importance.

As of April 2017, MSI has 23 ongoing activities with just over focused on diversifying Macedonia's media landscape and increasing the resilience of media actors. Over the coming six months, MSI will continue seeking out and supporting individuals and groups from a wide range of ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds and political affiliations to ensure Macedonian citizens have access to spaces for civic engagement.

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