Media Consultation Dialogue 1 // Summary

MCD participants present:
- Anamari Repić; Biljana Stepanović; Darko Dimitrijević; Ismet Hajdari; Ivana Petrović; Maja Stojanović; Ivana Stevanović; Stevan Ristić;

MCD participants absent:
- Agron Bajrami; Elviana Berani; Idro Seferi; Maja Živanović; Zoran Sekulić; Milivoje Mihajlović; Tamara Skrozza; Imer Mushkolaj;

ALVED project members present:
- Anthony Foreman, Program Director (PCi); Ian Bancroft, Project Manager (PCi); Nenad Sebek, Media Strategy Manager (PCi); Mjellme Doli, Monitoring and Communications Officer (PCi); Kadri Rexha, Head of Communications (PEN); Donika Lamaxhema, Communication Officer (PEN); Miodrag Milicevic, Head of Communications (AKTIV); Katarina Lazic, Communication Officer (AKTIV); Ognjen Gogic, Project Coordinator (AKTIV); Teodora Zahirovic, Head of Communication (CI); Masa Zivojinovic, Communication Officer (PIN);

Date: Tuesday, 17 November, 2020
Discussion points: **1.** Why does "othering" occur in the media?
                          2. How does "othering" occur in the media?
                          3. What can we do to reduce the prevalence and impact of the "othering" narratives in the media?
                          4. Do we need a follow up to today's dialogue and what kind?

Discussion outcomes:

Why does "othering" occur in the media?

- There was a broad consensus concerning the **political factors that enable othering in media** discourse. There were several dimensions to this discussion:
  - Political elites in Serbia fuel the 'othering' to mobilize supporters to keep them in power, by constant creation and re-enforcement of the 'enemy'.
    - A norm of 'othering' has been established and is maintained by political parties as a way of keeping attention away from progress in actual development.
  - There is a lack of political will to move forward with normalisation, with the consequence that there is no discussion about what could be gained by being in the European Union.
  - One participant mentioned 'we are lucky to have the migrant crisis, which created new "others" from outside'.
  - It was suggested that 'othering' had become worse since the Brussels Dialogue began. The 'othering' might serve to fend off the pressure to make significant concessions in the dialogue, or else to re-emphasise the need to formalise the separation of the countries.
  - The status dispute between Kosovo and Serbia affects everything, creating clear limitations on what can be said and how. In Serbia, it is not possible to present Kosovo 'as an equal'. In Kosovo, it is not possible to speak up for the rights of the Serb minority.
  - Independent media is practically powerless in comparison to state-controlled media.

How does "othering" occur in the media?

- There was a view that **a significant portion of journalists in the profession do not know what professional journalism looks like**.
  - For a number of journalists, state-controlled journalism is a norm. Rather than seeing their work as a tool to hold the state to account, it might be understood as an institution to promote and support the state.
  - Editors do not seem to do enough to encourage professional journalistic behaviour. Young journalists say that they do not check facts, because they do not have time.
  - An aggravating factor – and perhaps separate from this lack of understanding of journalistic standards – is the tone set by tabloid newspapers (and electronic media), described as 'losing all sense of decency'.

- There was a view that **media influencers manipulate public opinion** through 'Spin Doctors'.
  - One participant mentioned, "when I think about the 'othering' issue is run by a huge group of Spin Doctors."

- There was a discussion about **the right way to cover sensitive or conflict-related issues**.
  - The 'Mirëdita, dobar dan!' festival has been attracting more and more protest groups, and coverage of the festival – even by the independent media – often brings more visibility to the extremist groups than it does to the messages being carried by the festival.
  - By contrast, there was an example very effective (moderate and well-considered) coverage of a meeting in Nis of the relatives of missing persons, which is an issue that can be covered in an irresponsible way if not treated carefully.
  - How things are covered in one society could have an impact on how it is covered in another, with journalists feeling that they are inevitably pulled into a tit-for-tat competition. Could this cycle be broken if there was coordination or acts of solidarity between journalists on either side of the conflict line?

- **The presentation of the work of the Specialist Chamber** is seen as critical at this time. Risks are present to society, depending on how its work is presented, but there may also be opportunities to show how responsible coverage could be done.

- There is a **lack of functioning institutions** that support the functioning of the independent press. The following examples were given:
  - The behaviour of the tabloids could, in some cases, be a case for the legal system, and they are never held accountable in this way.
  - There is insufficient clarity on media ethics.
  - Institutions such as Press Councils might exist but are not active or effective.

What can we do to reduce the prevalence and impact of the "othering" narratives in the media?

- There was considerable agreement on **gaps in coverage of one society by another**. Problems include:
  - An example of missing persons' story in Nis was shared as a positive example. The lack of 'othering' in the story was attributed to the story being potentially very sensitive for both Kosovo and Serbian communities, hence it was stated that "this is a good example how when we put politics apart and focus on community, we can get positive outcomes."
  - "What we need to see is more real-life human stories from people" a member mentioned.
  - Stories that can find the audience in both sides and resonate in them.
  - There is a lack of stories about positive co-existence or other slices of life that might connect with the positive side of people's expectations. "People like to read about themselves", so there is space to write about thing that are close to people personally.
  - *While participants thought that having these stories out there was very important, it was not discussed how they would have an impact. The discussion did not deepen an understanding of why such stories do not appear now and who needs to carry them for them to have an impact.*

- It was mentioned that **functional legal infrastructures and institutions are important in stopping unethical and unprofessional media outlets**.
  - Stronger and independent press councils and other regulative bodies.
  - Independent legal institutions (i.e. courts, prosecutors).

- **Cooperation between media outlets in Kosovo and Serbia** can help this, and this does already happen to a certain extent. There are examples of joint productions, sharing content, networking among journalists, integrated newsrooms.

- There was **little optimism about engaging pro-government media**. They are seen to be people who do not have their own will (beholden to political powers) and do not have real journalistic integrity. These media dedicate space to attacking independent media, creating a conflict situation in which it is difficult to imagine a constructive dialogue. If a dialogue was to take place, it is not clear which people would be interested to hear from one another. Only one of the participants had an interest in engaging with people from this part of the media ecosystem.

Do we need a follow up to today's dialogue and what kind?

- There was considerable agreement that another meeting should be organized to continue the dialogue.

Media Consultation Dialogue 1 Follow up call//Meeting Summary/conclusions

MCD1 participants:
Agron Bajrami (Editor, Koha, Pristina); Anamari Repić (Journalist, Correspondent RTK, Pristina/Belgrade); Darko Dimitrijević (Editor, Radio Gorazdevac); Elviana Berani (Editor-in-chief at InfoGlobi, Pristina; Idro Seferi (Journalist, Correspondent for a number of Albanian and Serbian language media from Belgrade); Isak Vorgučić (Director, RTV KiM, Gracanica); Maja Stojanović (Executive Director Civic Initiatives, Belgrade); Tamara Skrozza (Journalist, VREME magazine, Belgrade); Zoran Sekulić (Founder and Editor of FONET news agency, Belgrade);

ALVED project representatives present:
- Anthony Foreman, Program Director (PCi); Ian Bancroft, Project Manager (PCi); Nenad Sebek, Media Strategy Manager (PCi); Kadri Rexha, Head of Communications (PEN); Donika Lamaxhema, Communication Officer (PEN); Miodrag Milicevic, Head of Communications (AKTIV); Katarina Lazic, Communication Officer (AKTIV); Teodora Zahirovic, Head of Communication (CI); Masa Zivojinovic, Communication Officer (PIN);

Date: Tuesday, 01 December, 2020

Discussion points:
    1. What exactly do we mean by positive stories?
    2. Why do we lack such positive stories now? What is stopping your media from having more such stories?
    3. What are the non-political and non-divisive stories that you have done and which really resonated when you had positive feedback from the audience?
    4. Which media platforms would be best suited to intervene to this divisive narrative?

Discussion outcomes:

What exactly do we mean by positive stories?

- During the discussion disagreement appeared regarding what positive stories mean. **There were a few thoughts brought on the table by participants:**

  o Positive stories stand for a part of a reality that media in Serbia and Kosovo do not cover well enough.
    - The Serbian and Albanian media do not reflect the ordinary lives of the people (meaning that the lives of Serbs living in Kosovo and vice-versa, are not represented in the media).
  o The term "positive stories" sounds like some kind of propaganda, in terms that the reality might not be represented as it is; the media should aim for comprehensive and unbiased coverage.

- o The term "positive stories" appears to be problematic to define since it is sensitive; positive elements might appear even in negative stories that reveal something important that serves to the public interest.
- o There was agreement to some extent that the reality should be represented as it is, not by insisting on 'positive stories'.
- o It is important to report on the economic and cultural life of both countries, in order to identify the similarities.
- o Agron Bajrami mentioned that: "KOHA is now in a joint project producing a weekly show with "Vijesti" and "Oslobodjenje" (Montenegro & Bosnia and Herzegovina). We turn out stories of daily life, of ordinary people not necessarily political stories. Which I think can fall into the category of positive news. We simply speak about daily life, what is our routine and what are our problems – how do we cope with economic problems - what do we like to eat?

- There was a broad consensus **that the lack of financial resources is the main barrier on producing the so-called positive stories**:

  - o The media in Serbia and Kosovo have almost no correspondents in one another's countries.
  - o It was mentioned that nobody pays for negative stories, should we subsidise positive ones? (a disagreement with first round of MCD1 when the overwhelming majority supported the idea that more positive stories are needed. Perhaps the discrepancy is due to the fact that the term "Positive stories" was understood in a different context during the follow up).
  - o Another element mentioned as a barrier that stops the media from having such 'positive stories' is the language. Only a few Serbian and Albanian journalists speak the other's language.
  - o Regarding reporting and presenting stories from North Mitrovica in Kosovo, security was mentioned as one of the issues; Although there was agreement that the situation is better than it used to be a few years ago and, ultimately, not a barrier.
  - o The public/audiences are not interested in 'positive stories' concerning 'the other'.
  - o The media are market-driven/commercial; Stories concerning political events are considered as more "sensational" and "appealing" therefore more interesting while "non-political, "daily life" stories tend to get the chop. The issue is the choices that editors make.
  - o Most of the media in both countries rely on collegial relations with peer organisations for news materials.
  - o One participant mentioned that "people are still living in separate bubbles and there is little space in these bubbles to meet and socialize… everything is separated on an ethnic basis" and also that "People want to hear tensions, emotions, so maybe the suggestion would be - let's sit down and do a training model for journalism that would be interesting but at the same time generating a more positive mind-set".
  - o There was a general agreement the trends are in favour of emotional and sensationalist journalism.
  - o One participant mentioned that "Media in Serbia don't usually report on ordinary Albanians. No Serbian TV would do that. They never interview Albanians in the street".
  - o There was a sort of general agreement that foreign media pay more attention to reporting on ordinary people's lives in Kosovo and Serbia.
  - o The view that 'positive stories' are stories that are in the public interest. They may 'feel negative' in that they may have a dark side. But even stories about war crimes, for example, should be perceived as 'positive stories', since they contain important information, important perspectives and they need to be discussed. "We need to see reality for what it is. Normally it is darker in the West Balkans".
  - o There is a need to show the public that political news is not the only news. It is our responsibility to cover politics, but we should not neglect other issues.
  - o In many cases, all reporting is very much in the shadow of political news. This can be overcome at the local level (where there is also good cooperation between journalists), but more difficult at the national level.
  - o There is a need to address relationships among the media first (educate ourselves), after that we will be able to shift views in the public (educate the public).

- The following proposals were put forward to tackle the issues identified.
  - Starting of a "small pool" where every media provides small stories that can be used by others; One story per day or three stories per week.
  - Designing a strategy for shifting the public taste (i.e. escaping from sensationalism and emotional journalism).
  - Uncompromised media should discuss more about both societies, perhaps through a platform to meet and talk regularly.
  - Developing of a training module that would provide a solution to the problem of sensationalist and emotional journalism and help in shifting the media discourse by generating a more positive mind-set.
  - Joint trainings for multimedia skills in joint places to enhance the networking and to revive and build capacities.
  - Establishing an annual award on the best stories that resemble ethnic coexistence.
  - Exchange of journalists between Pristina and Belgrade.

- There was a broad consensus that the **non-political** and **non-divisive** stories that they have done are focused on ordinary daily lives/routine:

  - One participant mentioned that: In March I did 48 TV stories in Albanian about a Serbian woman who didn't go out for 40 days (Covid-related), the audience somehow felt they could relate to her.
  - Stories regarding music, art, culture and culinary might appeal to an audience if they are interesting enough to attract their attention.
  - One of the participant mentioned that "a story about interethnic marriages had 300 000 viewers on YouTube.

What media platforms would be best for publishing these stories?

- Almost all the participants agreed **that social media are the best suited/appropriate platforms to publish and share these positive stories:**

  - The discussion was focused on how to attract young audiences:
    - There was a view that the focus of dissemination of the 'positive stories' should be the young audiences
    - The digital era changed the character of the news agencies; it is a must for the news agencies to adapt to these innovations (i.e. be compatible with cell phones)
    - Media should shift from producing for TV and printed press to reaching audiences through mobile devices
    - The older generations are still keen to consume mainstream media and should not be neglected