

ANNUAL NARRATIVE REPORT FOR 2023

INTRODUCTION

Reactor – Research in Action (hereinafter: Reactor) is an independent non-for-profit research organization [think-tank] based in Skopje, North Macedonia, dedicated to strengthening the country's Euro-integration processes by providing relevant research and proposing policy alternatives based on facts and proactive community engagement. The main thematic areas of Reactor's work include gender equality, youth, urban development, as well as enhancing civil society participation.

All of Reactor's activities are inspired and guided by the vision of gender-equal, socially and environmentally just societies, nationally and globally, where people in all their diversity can live a free and dignified life while actively contributing to the establishment of a fair, just, and sustainable society.

Reactor's primary focus and core activity is conducting research. Given the lack of available or adequately processed data in policymaking processes at the local, national and regional level, one of our main strategic objectives has always been to provide relevant, timely and thoroughly researched data to inform policy processes and engage key stakeholders, both within our specific areas of focus and more broadly. Reactor's main activity involves delivering timely and pertinent research, proposing evidence-based policy alternatives, undertaking advocacy and actively collaborating with the community, civil society organizations, academic institutions and political actors. Through our research, advocacy and facilitation of debates and discussions on issues relevant to the citizens of North Macedonia, Reactor contributes to policymaking processes at the local, national and regional levels, while also monitoring their implementation.

The impact of Reactor's work is significantly enhanced through cooperation and support from the international community. Reactor therefore nurtures partnerships with key actors within the country and the region. We regularly engage with and monitor the activities of EU bodies and institutions, making the most of opportunities arising from UN monitoring processes, and providing valuable data and insights to embassies and international organizations. Through these collaborations, we strive to influence domestic politics and expedite societal development by promoting and fostering civic participation, upholding human rights, advocating for equality and the rule of law. The European Union (EU) and the Swedish Agency for International Development and Cooperation (Sida) are the primary donors that offer sustainable support in this field in the country, with a particular emphasis on women and youth in their leading initiatives aimed at fostering smart, inclusive and sustainable growth. Reactor's areas of work are also recognized in part of their strategic documents, such as in the strategic country financing documents under IPA mechanisms.

THEMATIC AREAS AND PROGRAMMING ACTIVITIES (CURRENT PROJECTS)

GENDER EQUALITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

EU advocacy

DURATION: JANUARY 2021 - DECEMBER 2023

DONOR: KVINNA TILL KVINNA FOUNDATION

The main objective of [this project](#) is to improve the lives of women, girls, men and boys in the country by advancing gender equality, contributing to better drafting and implementation of gender equality legislation and strategic documents based on quality research, gender mainstreaming and gender segregated data, as well as to increase the visibility of women's rights in the different EU accession processes. The project also aims to increase participation of women's civil society organizations (WCSOs) in the different processes and decision making related to the EU integration of North Macedonia.

In 2023, Reactor remained actively engaged in various consultative and advocacy initiatives aimed at mainstreaming gender and advancing gender equality within the country. These efforts involved collaborating with both national and international stakeholders, including officials of the national government and local self-government units, EU officials, and international organizations.

One of the most significant outputs and activity is the development of regular annual inputs and recommendations to the EC Country Report for North Macedonia, which for this year marked a positive trend and we believe some crucial advocacy points were considered. As in the previous two years, Reactor contributed to the EC Country Report both in the preparatory phase and through a follow up input to the published EC report for 2023, through a written paper "[In a Nutshell: Brief Gender Analysis of the 2023 Country Report](#)", and through online and face to face consultations that took place at national and Brussels level. Master documents - written input and follow up recommendations, were further tailored and used in diverse advocacy interactions throughout the year.

Furthermore, Reactor actively participated in advocacy events such as the EU Advocacy Week in Brussels and the EIGE Closing Conference. These engagements contributed to increased inclusion of WCSOs in significant political events related to the accession processes. At national level, Reactor remained involved in all EU accession related processes, maintaining, or trying to establish good relations with different government and EU bodies and representatives.

There were at least 27 WCSOs involved in joint initiatives with Reactor through the National Gender Equality Platform (NGEP) and at least 5 joint initiatives referred to the EU accession. As mentioned above, in November 2023, Reactor's president Tania Ivanova participated in the EU Advocacy week and all the preparatory activities, organized, and supported by Kvinna till Kvinna. During this process, Reactor supported other WCSOs in drafting joint documents and developing a separate country level paper, as well as a separate written input to the EU Country Report 2023 and one policy brief on gender equality at the local level. These documents were the basis for further advocacy points discussed with diverse representatives of the European Commission, including the Swedish permanent representation and diverse MEPs. Reactor also developed two separate briefs and inputs

at national level for the Secretariat for European Affairs (SEA) and the Commission for Prevention and Protection from Discrimination (CPPD).

Reactor also participated to the third Annual structured dialogue to enhance the implementation of the EU's Action Plan on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in External Action 2021-2025 (GAP III), and contributed to this important [global event](#) and the follow up [report](#).

Throughout 2023, Reactor continued to provide written input and oral feedback to improve gender aspects in national strategic documents, legislative processes and policy development. However, key laws on gender equality, such as the Law on Gender Equality, the Law against harassment in the workplace and the Labour Law, faced significant challenges in the institutional and drafting phases and have not been adopted yet. These laws, especially the draft Law on Gender Equality, encountered significant opposition and have not been adopted primarily due to the growing anti-gender and anti-democratic movement in the country, as highlighted in the [2023 EU Country Report for North Macedonia](#). Consequently, this necessitated further advocacy efforts by WCSOs in the country.

In the past year, Reactor also updated the [Local Gender Equality Index](#) (LGEI) and Rodov Reactor (Gender Reactor) websites. On October 26th, 2023, Reactor organized a panel discussion: Political and societal equality of women at local level. On this event, we presented both the LGEI and the study [Women in Politics 2: Path to Public Office and Impact at the Local Level in North Macedonia \(a follow-up study\)](#). This publication, although not part of this project, it is a synergy activity and part of the WoMen Lead: Advancing Gender Equality through Women's Political Participation project financed by Sweden and implemented by the National Democratic Institute (NDI), to which Reactor contributed by conducting a follow up survey (2022-2023) to the award-winning one that dates back to 2014-2015.

Other activities were also undertaken within the project to achieve the stated objectives and foster synergies with other project activities described below and in the internal reports that Reactor duly submits according to agreed periods and budgets.

Furthering gender equality through the EU accession process

DURATION: MARCH 2020 - FEBRUARY 2024

DONOR: *EUROPEAN COMMISSION, SWEDISH INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION AGENCY*

This [Action](#) aims to further gender equality in the WB through the EU Accession Process.

The overall objective of this four-year Action (2020-2024) is to enhance and broaden existing regional cooperation, to strengthen participatory democracies and to bring about an inclusive gender-sensitive EU Approximation process. Towards this aim, the Action's specific objectives include:

- To enhance WCSO capacities to effectively engage with governments, EU Delegations and Office (EUD/ EUO), local CSOs and other CSOs in the region, making all involved actors aware of the gender dimensions of the EU Accession process.
- To improve accountability of governments and EUD/EUO in implementing commitments to gender equality and women's rights during the EU Accession process.

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This project is funded by the European Union and co-financed by Sweden, and partner organisations for its implementation are:

- Republic North Macedonia: Reactor – Research in Action (leading organization), The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation - office at RSM (partner organization)
- Kosovo: [Kosovo Women's Network](#) (Partner Organisation)
- Albania: [Albanian Women's Empowerment Network \(AWEN\)](#) (Partner Organisation)
- Bosnia and Herzegovina: [Rights for All](#) (Partner Organisation)
- Montenegro: [Women's Rights Centre](#) (Partner Organisation)

The key activities under this project, which have taken place during 2023, are:

- Networking and experience exchange meetings and events for the regional network of WCSOs aimed at strengthening their influence on the EU Accession process and expanding the existing regional network of WCSOs;
- Capacity building and awareness-raising for diverse CSOs on gender aspects of the EU Accession process;
- A high-level Regional Forum on Gender Equality in the EU Accession;
- Producing gender analyses for different sectors at a national level, particularly where such analyses are lacking;
- Collaborating with local WCSOs for monitoring and reporting on the implementation of gender equality commitments by governments;
- Monitoring and preparing reports to inform and gender mainstream EC Country Reports and political dialogue related to EU accession; and
- Advocating for an improved gender perspective in the EU Accession process at national and regional levels.

Key results from this Action achieved by the end of 2023 include:

- Improved networking and participation of the existing regional women's rights advocacy network to mainstream gender in the EU Accession process;
- Contribution to policy and decision-making processes by direct involvement of CSOs in these processes at national, regional and EU level;
- Successful sub-granting component, providing 30 grants awarded to civil society organizations (CSOs) from 6 countries (North Macedonia, Albania, Kosovo, Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina), amounting to € 438.143;
- Over 1300 women benefiting directly through different trainings, capacity buildings, legal aid, etc. in 6 WB countries;

- Diverse local women’s rights groups’ strengthened capacities that enable increased and improved participation in the EU Accession process;
- Enhanced capacities of CSOs to effectively engage with governments, EUD/EUO and other CSOs in the region, making these actors more aware of the gender dimensions of the EU Accession process, their importance and agency;
- Improved accountability of governments and EUD/EUO in implementing commitments to gender equality and women’s rights during the EU Accession process and mainstreaming gender in EU Accession process, politically and financially;
- Over 10 evidence-based baseline and endline reports, improving knowledge and understanding the gender mainstreaming of the EU accession processes, through continuous monitoring of these in each of the WB countries;
- Over 10 national gender analyses of unanalyzed sectors in two languages that inform stakeholders and relevant target audiences and contribute to the mainstreaming of the EU accession processes in each partner country.

As part of this Action, the [EQUAPRO Coalition](#) has been formed. The Coalition for Gender Equality in the European Union (EU) Accession Process (EQUAPRO) is an informal coalition of women’s rights organizations (WCSOs) in the Western Balkans (WB), which is advocating to improve attention to gender equality in the EU Accession process and to include more women and WCSOs in EU Accession-related political dialogues, policy processes, and as beneficiaries of EU external financing.

In 2023, a high-level [Regional Forum: Gender Equality in the EU Accession process](#), organized by the EQUAPRO Coalition, took place on September 12th in Hotel Aleksandar Palace in Skopje, North Macedonia. The event brought gender equality in the center of the political debate related to the EU Accession Process and created a forum for dialogue between the different regional stakeholders who jointly reflected on current and past experiences in furthering gender in the EU Accession processes, and shared best practices towards gender-sensitive EU Accession process for all WB countries. Within the three thematic sessions, the panelists discussed gender in the political dialogue, integrating a gender perspective in EU Accession and related policies and the importance of CSO engagement in SAA Structures. Some of the facts and highlights from this event are available [here](#). Additionally, all publications, data and news related to this Action are available at this [link](#).

NATIONAL GENDER EQUALITY PLATFORM

DURATION: Continuous

DONOR: ACTIVITIES ARE CARRIED OUT ON A VOLUNTARY BASIS

As a result of the Gender Equality Council project, the National Gender Equality Platform (NGEP) was established in 2014 , which has since been coordinated by Reactor. The NGEP aims to improve the overall climate for gender equality in the country, strengthen women’s organizations, develop interactive knowledge-based data on gender equality, and raise public awareness on the issue.

Throughout 2023, Reactor maintained collaboration with member organizations of the NGEP, particularly related to rapid response reactions on emerging [issues](#). There were at least a dozen joint

reactions addressing various concerns in relation to women's rights in the country. One of the key activities of the NGEF is the Women's Rights March held annually on International Women's Day. On March 8th, 2023, the seventh march for women's rights, titled "Will women survive here?", took place, conveying a powerful message about the challenges faced by women in North Macedonia, emphasizing the lack of equality, freedom and safety.

Additionally, Reactor initiated two separate strategic and coordination meetings with NGEF members, both of which were successfully conducted. Throughout 2023, Reactor actively participated in several initiatives and activities agreed upon during these meetings.

YOUTH

During 2023, Reactor's team implemented several initiatives in our youth programme. As in past years, Reactor continued its presence at the National Youth Council of Macedonia (NMSM), participating in regular council meetings, but also in activities aimed at creating cohesion and prioritizing youth, while successfully supporting initiatives by NMSM related to various relevant issues affecting the lives of young people.

For instance, Reactor participated and provided input in the process of amending the Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies, which began in February-March 2023, and was initiated by NMSM. In the autumn of 2023, a Draft Amendments Forum was organized, and proposal amendments were presented, indicating that the proposals submitted by NMSM, and supported by Reactor, were generally taken into account. The most significant suggested changes and additions relate to facilitating the procedure for forming local youth councils, restructuring financing with a separate program in the budget plan, specifying the function of the youth officer, and introducing oversight of law implementation.

Additionally, as member of the NMSM, Reactor played an active role in shaping the National Youth Strategy 2023-2027, with an Action Plan for 2023-2025, which was adopted in September 2023. Furthermore, at the NMSM's general assembly in November 2023, Reactor provided comments and recommendations to the draft- National Development Strategy 2024-2044, where youth and gender are expected to be included as cross-sectoral issues.

In addition to these activities, Reactor nominated and supported its member Zoja Tarevska Petrushevska for the Executive Board of NMSM. She was elected as an Executive Board member in November 2023.

ENHANCING CIVIL SOCIETY PARTICIPATION

Although during 2023 Reactor did not have an official project and funding for this part of our programme, we embrace this segment through ongoing projects and are actively working on fundraising for greater engagement. It is worth noting that both the *EU advocacy* and *Furthering*

gender equality through the EU accession process projects have allowed such engagement and synergies are utilized to demonstrate our dedication to the issues beyond project-based work.

Throughout 2023 Reactor's representatives participated in two separate EU TACSO 3 events. In July 2023, Reactor's Project Coordinator Zoja Tarevska – Petrushevska attended the Second Gender Mainstreaming Training Programme for Financial Support of Third Parties (FSTP). She was a speaker at the second day of the training which was organized for 30 representatives from CSOs in the Western Balkan countries and Turkey who are implementing EU-funded re-granting programmes, but also CSOs interested in developing and implementing FSTP programmes in the future.

Additionally, Reactor's Grants Manager Ana Azgour attended the Second Annual FSTP Community of Practice Meeting, held in November 2023 in Sarajevo. The purpose of the event was to discuss progress, new developments, current practices and common issues, as well as to exchange experiences and knowledge on successful FSTP practices.

URBAN DEVELOPMENT

“SUNNY SCHOOLS” INITIATIVE

DONOR: OSF MACEDONIA

DURATION: JULY 2023 – JUNE 2024

The [‘Sunny Schools’ initiative](#) involves the state schools and the local self-government units in the process of transitioning to clean and renewable energy, specifically solar energy, through photovoltaic technology. The Initiative is supported and implemented by the Open Society Foundation in the Western Balkans and the Open Society Foundation in North Macedonia, and the educational aspect is carried by the National Youth Council of Macedonia. This Initiative is being concurrently implemented in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Serbia.

Reactor is leading the research component implemented in 8 primary schools and 4 secondary schools in four municipalities: Butel, Cair, Berovo and Stip in two phases – prior to and following the installation of solar panels on the rooftops of experimental schools. The goal is to assess whether photovoltaic installations and educational activities on the importance of green energy will have an impact on the satisfaction of the school environment and processes as well as on the attitudes relating to green energy. Both waves of the study will involve up to 1760 students, 1320 parents and 400 teachers.

During 2023 (October-November), the first wave of the study was conducted, and it involved 880 students, 188 teachers and 536 parents. The second wave is scheduled to be conducted in the spring of the following year (March-April).

ORGANISATIONAL ACTIVITIES

ADVOCACY

Consistent with previous years and our efforts in 2023, Reactor continued to serve as a resource centre for relevant research and analyses. These resources were continuously and consistently utilized and disseminated to stakeholders at the local, national and international level.

As previously, our advocacy approach comprises two key components:

1. Online access – launching and updating web platforms and curated content on social media, employing modern visualization techniques and data presentation methods.
2. Offline approach – maintaining a continuous production of research outputs and recommendations, engaging in lobbying efforts, consultative meetings, debates and discussions.

In addition to our regular production of relevant research products, we also prioritized the creation of user-friendly [web spaces](#) for the presentation of data, findings and recommendations.

ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

In late 2022 and in the first part of 2023, Reactor started a process of strengthening its team and creating a new organizational strategy. The new strategy aimed to consider all the external context changes, both societal and political, as well as internal changes in Reactor, that required a reset of the main mission and vision. Additionally, a dedicated restructuring of Reactor's work, main goals and prospects was needed. The work that began in 2022 continued during the first half of 2023. First and foremost, an external expert was contracted to review the methodology and related tasks, and as an outcome, a detailed report with a focused diagnosis of Reactor, as well as a draft-organizational strategy was created.

MONITORING, EVALUATION AND LEARNING

In accordance with the organisational strategy for development and strategic definitions of the organisation for continuous improvement and improvement of work and achievements, at the end of 2021, a one-day strategic workshop was held with the entire Reactor team, which also used the already prepared strategic framework for monitoring, evaluation and learning (by external expert Marina Skrabalo, from GONG Croatia, 2016). Using this strategic document as a guide, the Reactor team jointly identified the current conditions in terms of areas of action as well as the theory of changes to the organization and made a self-evaluation of them with additional discussion to define the following guidelines, processes and actors in terms of reactor research and advocacy work aimed at achieving positive social changes in the areas of action, as well as establishing the following steps to implement ongoing and future activities and possible solutions for monitoring and evaluation at the organizational level (note: at project level, Reactor regularly conducts monitoring and evaluation

within the agreed time frames and reporting activities towards donors). We continued with this process through 2022 (Reactor's basic strategic documents were renewed and internal policies aligned with ongoing legal changes, such as those related to the protection of personal data and confidentiality and PSEA standards). After a 2-day strategic retreat in December 2022, with an external expert for organizational assessment and growth, Reactor continued with these processes more systematically throughout 2023.

Due to sudden changes in the team which involve crucial Reactor staff, the newly drafted organizational strategy will have to be reevaluated and revised in 2024.

NEW STAFF

At the regular assembly of the organization, held in July 2023, the president was re-elected.

No new staff though we were coping with long leaves of 2 key persons in the team - Research Coordinator and Legal expert/Researcher and despite the burden the team managed to finalise foreseen activities successfully.

New hires are foreseen for the next calendar year.