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A special edition of GISWatch, "Internet governance from the edges: NRIs in their own words", is being published as a companion edition to the 2017 GISWatch annual report. It looks at the history, challenges and achievements of NRIs, as recounted by their organisers. It is available at https://www.giswatch.org

South Eastern European Dialogue on Internet Governance (SEEDIG)

SEEDIG: SPACE FOR NEW PERSPECTIVES

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Introduction

This report offers a perspective on the South Eastern European Dialogue on Internet Governance (SEEDIG)[2] initiative, based on a series of interviews that we have conducted with stakeholders.[3] We believe that SEEDIG is one of the most valuable and important bodies in South East Europe. Its annual one- to two-day meetings offer a dynamic atmosphere for networking, for forging consensus between stakeholders, and for learning. It also provides an important opportunity to engage with one of the region's most important stakeholders: governments. But while this report suggests that SEEDIG offers a positive approach to seeking solutions to internet governance, there remains a need to include more young people in its discussions.

Breaking through the shadows

In South East Europe, internet governance is mostly overshadowed by daily events and political turmoil. It was in this context that SEEDIG was started in 2014 following discussions by members of the internet community in South East Europe and representatives from the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN)[4] at the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) meeting in Istanbul. The SEEDIG initiative was formed with the intention of serving as a core forum for discussing internet governance in South East Europe, but also in the wider region.

From the start, SEEDIG had the support of EuroDIG, the pan-European internet governance forum. EuroDIG offered the sub-regional forum visibility and focus, and helped to strengthen relationships between the SEEDIG community and partners across Europe. With the support of EuroDIG, stakeholders in South East Europe had an opportunity to map the main internet governance issues faced by the region.

A key problem faced by the region when it comes to internet governance is how the different sectors understand digital rights and freedoms and the nature of internet governance. SEEDIG has the potential to help different stakeholders understand the challenges they face at both the regional and country level. As one participant interviewed for this report said: "The community is not in a position to understand how much these questions [on internet governance] are important in the region." However, he also pointed out that SEEDIG has its limitations: "Even SEEDIG cannot deal with all of the problems which we can face in this region."[5] Key regional internet governance issues identified include net neutrality, the importance of cybersecurity for end-users, and governance in the private sector.

Stakeholders involved in SEEDIG are drawn from different sectors – government, the business sector, civil society, the technical community, academia and the media – but also include individuals who want to contribute to the discussion. As one of the interviewees said: "It brings together groups of people who normally never engage with one and another, especially in highly competitive political environments."[6]

The discussion is open and wide-ranging, and sheds new light on old problems. For example, often the media in South East Europe only try to find bad examples of the implementation of cybersecurity strategies in the region; SEEDIG showcases best practices and good examples of what such a strategy could look like. The importance of showcasing positive solutions to problems during the discussions is one of the major highlights of SEEDIG.

SEEDIG still needs wider recognition by state officials. There is, as a result, a need for more awareness raising in the region about the importance

1 Cyber girl with an passion for numbers. Loud cryptoanarchist, but silent cryptographer. In crypto I trust.

2 For more on SEEDIG, see: www.seedig.net/background

3 Special thanks to Dušan, Michael, Sorina, Sasho, Lianna and others from SEEDIG for participating in the interviews.

4 https://www.icann.org

5 In-depth interview with Dušan Stojčevac.

6 In-depth interview with Michael Oghia.

of the forum, and of the need for and value of co-operation between stakeholders. In the sea of commercialised cybersecurity forums in the region, the importance of SEEDIG as a non-commercial, transparent and open forum for all stakeholders and end-users is huge.

One of the key issues in SEEDIG is that a healthy balance needs to be maintained in discussions between the different stakeholders. For example, it is important to strike a balance between the subjective impressions and fact-based contributions of stakeholders. It is also necessary to try to find consensus on different questions that arise during discussions. While the forum is multistakeholder, are we all equal at SEEDIG? This is an important question for all stakeholders who are trying to have an impact on internet governance in their countries or regions by organising IGFs.

The interviews conducted for this report suggest that one of the greatest values of SEEDIG is its potential for network building, which can lead to learning from best practices in the region, as well as greater cooperation between countries and different stakeholders in South East Europe. The region faces problems that are different from those found in Western and Central Europe – such as access, internationalised domain names, human rights and cybersecurity – and as a result, these challenges are not widely talked about. SEEDIG has the potential to be a new space where all stakeholders can share their ideas – in particular those that have been denied a voice in the region due to socioeconomic or other differences. Sometimes in South East Europe, "marginalised communities" are not your usual suspects. For example, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the youth are excluded from any kind of discussion to do with the internet and are not considered a relevant "stakeholder".

SEEDIG aims to address this by, for example, organising Youth Schools and running its Fellowship Programme, which has meant that a variety of people from different backgrounds have had the opportunity to be enriched professionally and personally. The following statement from one of the Youth School participants shows the impact that SEEDIG has had:

> The SEEDIG Youth School is for me still a vivid memory. Before being part of this event I did not know clearly the difference between e-governance and the governance of the internet. Now, not only do I know the difference, but I can proudly say that I have realised how important the governance of the internet is. The entire event was a source of rich information, since I was able to hear specialists from different fields talking about interesting topics such as cybersecurity, fake news, and smart cities.[7]

Some stakeholders are not represented in the SEEDIG discussions. Mostly they come from the business world – there are many events considered more important by the private sector to participate in. However, this is to be expected in a forum where stakeholders put forward progressive demands for internet governance.

Many national IGFs have been born as a result of SEEDIG, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Slovenia and others. Countries such as Macedonia and Albania are in the phase of preparing national IGFs. These national IGFs would not be inclusive without the bottom-up approach that is the result of the regional forum.

Conclusions

In South East Europe, internet governance is mostly overshadowed by daily events and political turmoil. The power of SEEDIG lies in the structure of the dialogue: its multistakeholder approach to internet governance helps to reunite a divided society through creating an open forum for sharing different viewpoints on digital governance, and the space to shape understanding and consensus. It offers us a new perspective on South East Europe where so many things are still unresolved.

It faces challenges, including its financial sustainability, and how to make discussions more relevant, particularly to marginalised and vulnerable groups. For example, when it comes to gender equality, the day-to-day gender disparities in the region in relation to digital empowerment can become more visible. SEEDIG can also offer a safe space for women to participate, one that is free from hate speech and online violence.

The extent to which we make the discussion more progressive and relevant depends on our ability to create a space that is not only important for the information technology community, but for every person in society. By remaining committed to an inclusive approach, SEEDIG will become more visible and vital to the region.

Action steps

The importance of addressing internet governance challenges in the region through incorporating the perspectives of all stakeholders in a transparent process is an example of good practice that needs

7 SEEDIG 2017 Annual Report. https://www.intgovforum.org/multilingual/index.php?q=filedepot_download/3568/727

to be considered by states, the private sector and civil society organisations in South East Europe.

SEEDIG is a relatively young initiative which will face challenges in the future. These include its financial sustainability, and its ability to remain a vital and relevant forum for regional internet governance discussions. It will be critical for it to include more stakeholders in its discussions in order to give the forum visibility and to influence regional policy perspectives.

What we need to see more at SEEDIG is the youth – not only from the information technology sector, but the individual young people who have a wish to be there and express their feelings, opinions and ideas. Only by including the youth through initiatives such as the Youth School will we see a wider and brighter perspective – especially in South East Europe, where we need to forget the borders and differences that somebody else has defined for us.

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National and Regional Internet Governance Forum Initiatives (NRIs)

National and Regional Internet Governance Forum Initiatives (NRIs) are now widely recognised as a vital element of the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) process. In fact, they are seen to be the key to the sustainability and ongoing evolution of collaborative, inclusive and multistakeholder approaches to internet policy development and implementation.

A total of 54 reports on NRIs are gathered in this year's Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch). These include 40 country reports from contexts as diverse as the United States, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Italy, Pakistan, the Republic of Korea and Colombia.

The country reports are rich in approach and style and highlight several challenges faced by activists organising and participating in national IGFs, including broadening stakeholder participation, capacity building, the unsettled role of governments, and impact.

Seven regional reports analyse the impact of regional IGFs, their evolution and challenges, and the risks they still need to take to shift governance to the next level, while seven thematic reports offer critical perspectives on NRIs as well as mapping initiatives globally.

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