

Terms of Reference (ToR)

Development of the Communication Strategy for the SEE Check Network

1. Introduction

SEE Check Network is composed of six fact-checking organizations from five countries in South-Eastern Europe (SEE in further context), focusing on identifying and debunking disinformation and promoting media literacy and media accountability.

The fact-checking web portals that make up the SeeCheck Network are the following: Raskrinkavanje.ba, Raskrinkavanje.me, Raskrikavanje.rs, Razkrinkavanje.si, Faktograf.hr and Fakenews.rs.

The network is currently implementing an EU-funded project titled “SEECHECK Network – fighting disinformation and misinformation through a network of fact-checkers”. One of the project's components is the development of a communication strategy for the SEE Check Network.

2. Background

Fighting disinformation while reaching and successfully engaging audiences is one of the biggest challenges that fact-checkers face. The proliferation of disinformation has been unprecedented in the recent period, marked by global events like the COVID-19 pandemic and the invasion of Ukraine. These events have also contributed to the increase of negative attitudes towards fact-checking, mostly by aggressive groups that have gained significant popularity, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as conspiracy theorists and their followers.

Fact-checkers also face other pressures and challenges in reaching their audiences in meaningful ways, such as negative campaigns from fringe or even some mainstream media outlets; as well as attacks from political and/or state actors. The difficulties described above have created an urgent need for the creation of research-based communication strategies that will mitigate the impact of mentioned negative trends on the work of fact-checkers.

3. Purpose and Coverage

The purpose of this contract is to engage an expert or an agency to conduct research and develop a communication strategy and communication plan for the SEE Check network.

The primary objectives of the communication strategy are:

- Identify the network’s audience(s) and audience-centred communication goals and strategies;
- Identify relevant stakeholders, as well as goals and approaches in communication with specific stakeholders;
- Propose solutions to promote, inform on the activities and enhance the visibility of the SEE Check network and its member organizations among the stakeholders and target population(s);
- Propose communication model(s) that could be used by both the network and its individual members in their regional capacity;
- Create guidelines and/or a protocol for crisis communication in accordance with the needs of the network and/or its individual members;
- Provide tools for stakeholders to understand the importance of fact-checking efforts and raise awareness on media literacy, risks of disinformation and misinformation.

4. Methodology and Scope of work

Under the supervision and in close cooperation with the SEE Check representatives, the expert or the agency will implement the following tasks:

- Research the current communication capacities and needs of the SEE Check and its members;
 - Conduct interviews (minimum five per country) and online focus groups (minimum one per country) with various stakeholders, including regional fact-checkers, to collect inputs and best practices;
 - Gather other relevant data, such as online and social media metrics and existing research data.
- Set the communication goals and objectives and identify effective techniques and tools;
- Develop key messages that effectively speak to the target audience and stakeholders;
- Plan available communication resources;
- Develop crisis management procedures;
- Write up a communication strategy with the implementation plan;
- Provide training for the SEE Check members to implement the strategy.

The expert will be engaged for **a total of 90 days** to conduct research, develop the communication strategy and complete the accompanying tasks.

5. Expert deliverables

The following will be the expected deliverables of the expert:

- Work plan for implementation of the Scope of work;
- Report on results and conclusions of interviews, focus groups and desk research, with an estimate of current communication capacities and needs of the SEE Check network;
- Recommendations and conclusions for developing the communication strategy based on the research report;
- Communication strategy;
- Final report on the implementation of tasks.

6. Duration and time frames

The project procurement of services outlined in this ToR is carried out by the project partner association Center for Democratic Transition (CDT) from Montenegro. The communication strategy shall be completed **by the end of September 2023 and delivered to the following email: aleksandra@cdtmn.org**

Seven (7) days after the signing of the contract, the expert is required to provide SEE Check - represented by the Center for Democratic Transition from Montenegro with an inception report that will articulate the overall requirements of the ToR including proposed methodology, work plan with clear timelines, and division of labour.

The project procurement of services for collecting data and conducting interviews and focus groups (minimum of five interviews and one focus group per country) with stakeholders as part of the development of the communication strategy is carried out by the project partner association Center for Democratic Transition from Montenegro.

7. Expert Competencies, Experience, and Skill Requirements:

- Advanced degree in the field of communications, or other relevant fields is preferred;
- Proven experience in the development and delivery of communication strategies;
- Proven experience (at least three years) in developing and designing communication strategies and evaluations;
- Demonstrated a high level of professionalism and an ability to work independently and in high-pressure situations under tight deadlines;
- Excellent communication and written skills in English

8. Deadline and submission of expression of interest

Centre for Democratic Transition from Montenegro / SEE Check invites interested experts and agencies to submit the following documentation by June 30th, 2023 at aleksandra@cdtmn.org:

- Expression of interest (EoI) outlining how the expert meets the selection criteria and their understanding of the ToR.
- Curriculum vitae, or company description (i.e. an overview of the company's plan, vision, and relationships).
- An example of similar work completed recently.
- Names and contacts of three recent professional referees (previous clients) for whom similar work has been conducted.
- A summarized description of a tentative work plan, including methodology, activities and time frames.
- Itemized financial proposal.

Disclaimer: This call is not limited to Montenegro only, and communication experts and agencies from other countries are also invited to submit their offers.

9. Evaluation and Selection Process

This application is open to experts and agencies who are specialized in developing and designing communication products. The selected contractor will be responsible for designing and executing all the activities described in this TOR in collaboration with SEE Check representatives and project coordinators of the Center for Democratic Transition from Montenegro.

The selection process will be based on a set of criteria developed by the SEE Check Evaluation Committee to evaluate the proposals. The Committee will evaluate proposals using the combined scoring method. The technical proposal will be evaluated on 60%; whereas financial proposals will be evaluated on 40%. The short-listed bidding expert or agency may be asked for a formal presentation before the final selection.

10. Final report

This section outlines expectations in terms of inception and final reporting, as well as interim process updates.

The final report will contain the list and brief description of activities executed during the development of the communication strategy. Below is a structure of a communication strategy (not more than 40 pages):

1. Title Page
2. Executive Summary (max two pages)
3. Acronyms
4. Table of Contents
5. Purpose, Coverage, and Scope

6. Communication capacities and needs (research report)
7. Goals and objectives of the communication strategy
8. Communication plan, including techniques, tools and procedures
9. Procedures for crisis management (for the network and individual member organizations) and early warning systems (list of situations requiring the crisis response)
10. Methodology

Please note that the Center for Democratic Transition from Montenegro and SEE Check will share the draft communication strategy with the SEE Check Steering Committee for approval. The expert needs to be available for making changes for the strategy to be conducted as per project and network needs.

The contractor will prepare the final report on the implementation of the tasks after finishing the development of the communication strategy. The deadline for sending the report is **10 days** after the completion of the communication strategy.