A black and white photograph of a globe, showing a map of Europe and the Middle East. The globe is tilted, and a red banner is overlaid on the bottom half. The banner contains the title and subtitle in white text. The map on the globe shows countries like Russia, Ukraine, Turkey, and the Balkans. The red banner is a solid color, and the text is in a clean, sans-serif font.

Covid-19 and Civil Society

An assessment overview on the impact of pandemic situation to Western Balkans countries

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Fostering regional cooperation and policy responses in time of crises

Project implemented by:

Covid-19 and Civil Society

An assessment overview on the
impact of pandemic situation
to Western Balkans countries

CONTENTS

- 05** Overview
- 06** Albania
Country case study report
- 20** Bosnia and Herzegovina
Country case study report
- 38** Kosovo
Country case study report
- 50** Montenegro
Country case study report
- 61** North Macedonia
Country case study report
- 80** Serbia
Country case study report

OVERVIEW

The COVID 19 pandemic, like all over the world, had an unprecedented impact in the Western Balkan countries. The effects caused by the pandemic apart from adverse health affected all sectors, becoming so eminent in all dimensions such as social, economic and psychological, putting into test also the democratic institutions of this region. Under these circumstances, all sectors strived to adopt and generate new ways to respond to the situation and continue their activities, including the civil society sector.

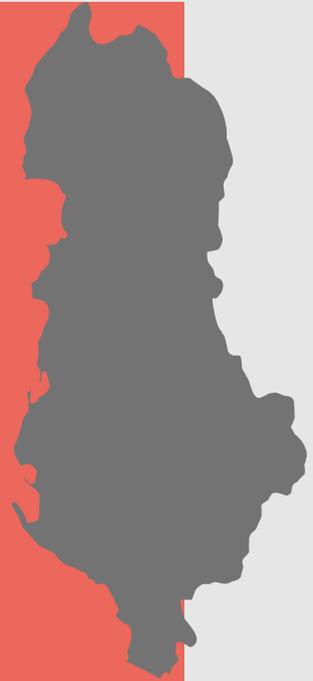
This publication presents six case studies on Covid-19 impact in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. Based on desk research and secondary data, the case studies provide an assessment overview of the socio-economic impact of Covid-19 in each of the Balkan countries, including data on the impact on target groups such as youth and students, women, marginalized people etc. while scrutinizing the government implemented measures to minimize impact on people and economy. It further explores the civil society ownership and inclusiveness in policy and decision-making in response to COVID-19 pandemic, fundamental rights and freedoms under the emergency situation, civil society shrinking space and access to domestic resources, the response mechanism implemented by relevant stakeholders in some key areas. Finally, it highlights and gives a showcase of Civil Society Organizations' good practices contributing to Covid-19 response related to policy advocacy, responding to basic needs of constituencies and community mobilization and other transformative actions.

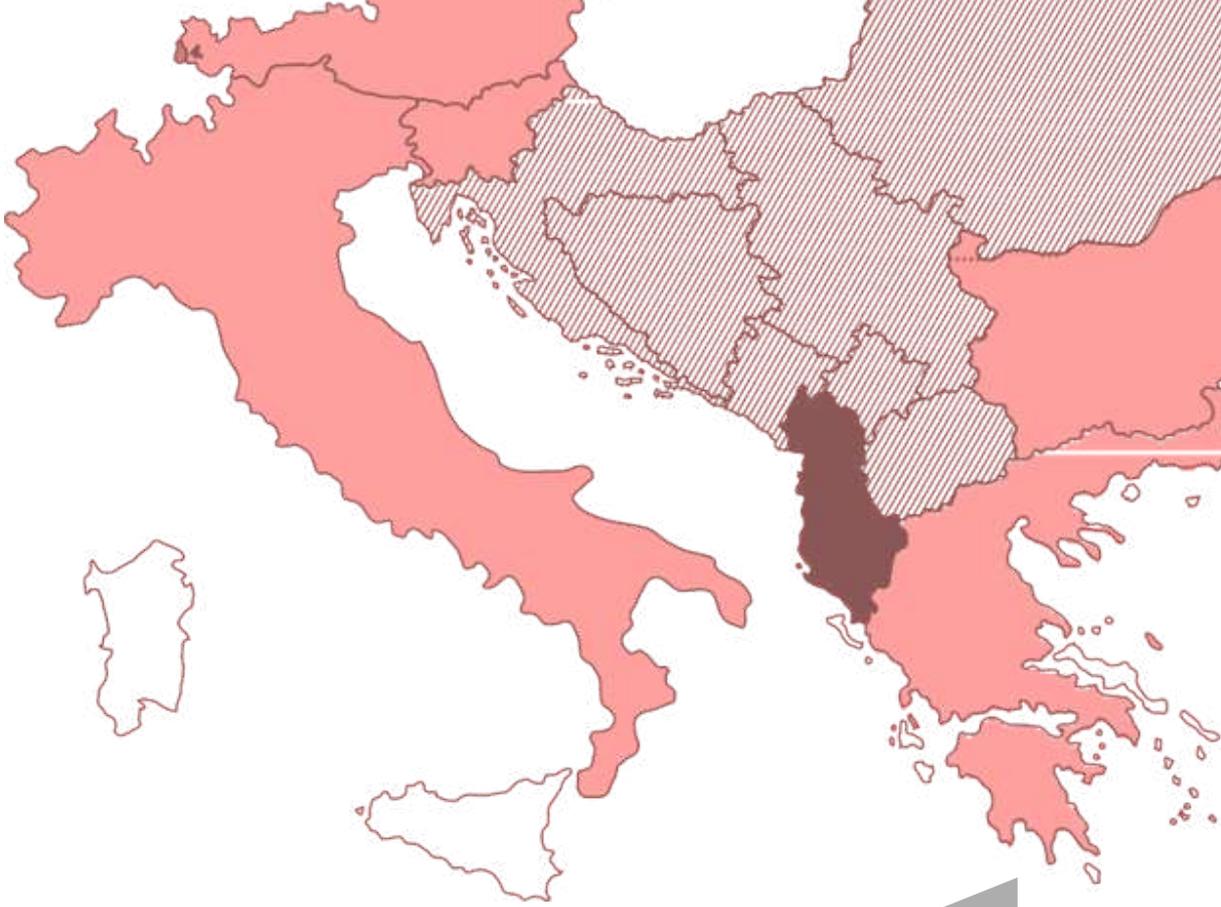


COUNTRY CASE STUDY
REPORT

ALBANIA

PREPARED BY
PARTNERS ALBANIA FOR CHANGE AND
DEVELOPMENT





ALBANIA

General overview of the country

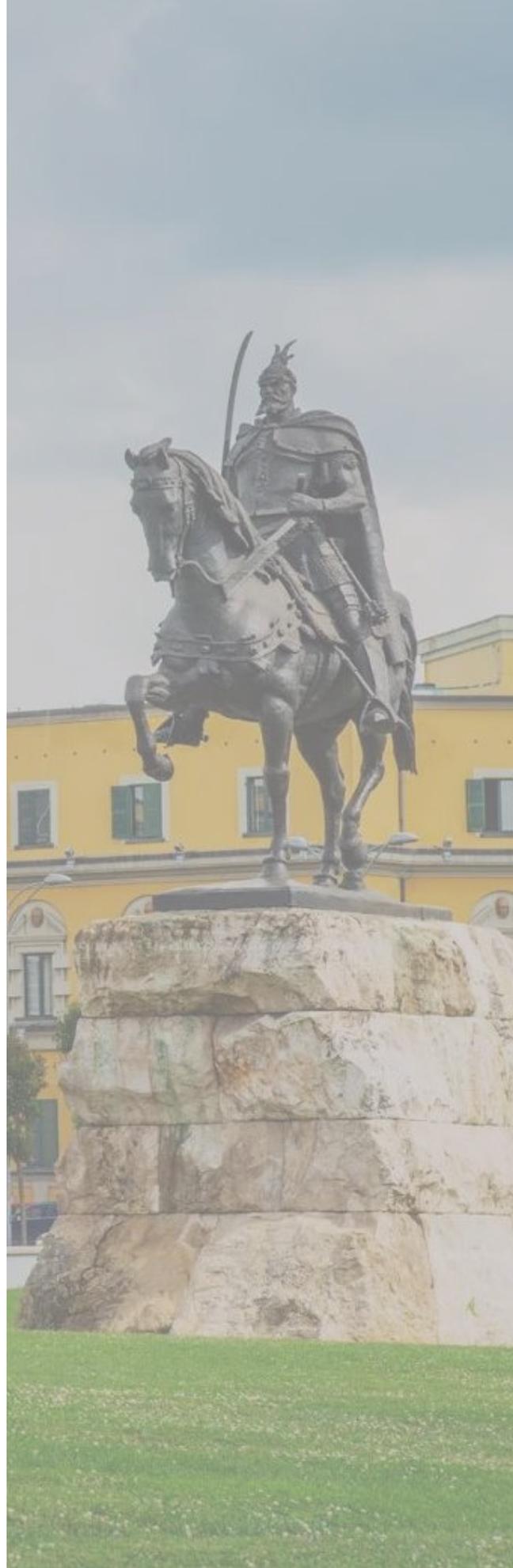
Albania has 2,829,741 inhabitants with a constant decrease of 0.5% on population, for the last three years. The women population accounts for 50.2 %, decreasing by 0.4 %, while the population of men was by 0.7 %. [1].

The Albanian population is aging. On 1 January 2021 the age group 60–79 years old occupies 18.9 % of total population, from 18.4 % as it was on 1 January 2020. There is also an increasing tendency for age groups over 80 years. Net migration for the last two years remains negative (difference between immigrants and emigrants).

The majority of the total population is located in the capital, Tirana, while the average distribution of population for other regions is 2% to 5% of the total population. [2] .

The GDP in volume terms increased by 6.99% compared to the same period of 2020. The economy branches that gave a positive contribution during 2021, were Trade, Transport, Accommodation and Food Services by +2.41 percentage point, during the same period of 2021 compare to 2020. [3]

The labour force participation rate for the population aged 15–64 years old is 69.3 % while the employment rate is 60.9 %. The gender gap in employment for this age group is 14.4 percentage points higher for males. At-risk of poverty rate in Albania, in 2019, is 23.0 % while the rate at Risk of Poverty or Social Exclusion is estimated 46.2 %. The services and agricultural sectors have the highest share of employed with respectively 44.3 % and 33.8 % of the total employment [4].



[1] INSTAT, Women and Man in Albania, 2021 <http://www.instat.gov.al/media/8713/burra-dhe-gra.pdf>

[2] INSTAT, Albania in Figures, 2020, <http://www.instat.gov.al/media/8988/albania-in-figures-2020.pdf>

[3] INSTAT, Labour Market, 2021 <http://www.instat.gov.al/media/10021/press-release-labour-market-2021.pdf>

[4] INSTAT, Quarterly Economic Growth, 2021 <http://www.instat.gov.al/media/9414/gdp-q3-2021.pdf>

The socio-economic impact of Covid-19 in the country

With the outbreak of the first cases on March 8, 2020, the Albanian government took a series of preventive and precautionary measures in minimizing the number of cases infected with Covid-19, starting with the closure of educational institutions, suspension of public gatherings and closure of public transport. With the spread of infection and the increased number of identified cases, the measures escalated resulting in complete closure of the country, curfew and lock down to minimize and restrict citizens' movements, and the declaration of a state of natural disaster on March 23, 2020 with the decision of Council of Ministers No.243. With the gradual decline of identified infected cases, starting from June 2020 the lockdown was removed and the restrictions gradually eased. Most economic activities returned to functioning under strict preventive and distance-keeping measures, with the exception of major public and cultural events. As per December 2021, all social and economic activity are operative, though curfew hours (from 22:00 to 6:00) are still on force and more than ten people gatherings are not allowed. All academic institutions are opened and fully functioned under preventive measures.



Impacts on the economy

Covid-19 had a significant impact on the economy resulting in a decrease of volume in all economy branches. The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the third quarter of 2020 decreased by 3.47 % compared to 2019. Trade, Transport, Accommodation and Food Services was the most affected branch decreasing by 13.01%. Also, household final consumption, which shares an important part in total economy decreased by 3.86 % along with general government consumption. [5]. The pandemic-related domestic lockdown and international travel restrictions caused significant losses for the tourism and manufacturing sectors. [6]. The number of foreign visitors, declined by 58.5% in 2020, compared to the same period of 2019 [7]. Furthermore, the number of active enterprises decreased along with the total number of employees (by 5.2 %.) In the decline of employment, producers of services had the largest contribution on the decrease, by -3.8 p.p, while producers of goods contributed -1.4 p.p. Export and imports of goods and services resulted in decreasing of volume as well compared to the same period of 2019 [8].

With the gradual withdraw of the restrictions, 2021 resulted in a slight improvement of the economic performance indicators. The GDP in volume terms increased by 6.99% compared to the same period of 2020. The economy branches that were hit and affected the most by Covid-19, such as Trade, Transport, Accommodation and Food Services marked growth by +2.41 percentage point, during the same period of 2021 compare to 2020. Net Taxes on products increased by 10.37% and all the other main GDP components such as house hold consumption (+ 3.33%) and government consumption increased by 7.59%. [9]. With the removal of restrictions, in 2021 the volume of transport of good and people also increased. Number of passengers traveling by air and sea increased compare to 2020, but not compare to the same period of 2019. [10]. Despite this, according to the World Bank overview, jobs did not increase in 2020–2021: there were over 16,000 fewer employed people in 2021 than in 2019. [11].

[5] INSTAT, Quarterly Economic Growth, 2020 <http://www.instat.gov.al/media/7868/gdp-q3-2020.pdf>

[6] European Union Commission, Key findings of the 2021 Report on Albania

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda_21_5276

[7] INSTAT, Movements of citizens in Albania, 2020 http://www.instat.gov.al/media/7948/movem-of-citizens-december_2020.pdf

[8] INSTAT, Foreign trade in goods, 2020 http://www.instat.gov.al/media/7931/tj-dhjetor-2020_.pdf

[9] Quarterly Economic Growth, 2021 <http://www.instat.gov.al/media/9414/gdp-q3-2021.pdf>

[10] INSTAT, Transport statistics, 2021 http://www.instat.gov.al/media/9515/statistikat-e-transportit_dhjetor_2021.pdf

[11] World Bank in Albania, 2021 <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/albania/overview#3>



Impacts on the people

As of 7th of December 2021, a total of 202,295 cases resulted positive to Covid-19, from which 192,967 are reported to be recovered while 3,122 lost their lives [12]. On January 11, 2021, Albania started the anti-COVID vaccination campaign, opening the first centre in Tirana and later others throughout the country. Medical staff was the first group to be vaccinated following the elderly in long-term care institutions, while continuing with other risk groups, according to the phases provided in the National Vaccination Plan against Covid-19. As of the 9th of December 2,166,207 people above the age of 16 are reported to be vaccinated, with 1,092,316 people being vaccinated with at least one dose.

After two years in the pandemic situation the unemployment rate in Albania, remains in the same level as in 2019 (11.5 %). Despite that the Covid-19 impact on unemployment is estimated to be higher, considering the rate of informal employment in the country. For 2019, informal employment was estimated to 56,7% of the total employment with a wide and considerable reach to all economic sectors and target groups. [13]. Informality is a major contributor to individual income risk, considering also the inability to benefit from government supporting packages to minimize jobs losses or other income safety nets. This could widen the economy's inequality gap, leaving a significant number of families at risk to be left out of protection due to the social protection system structure, pushing people into poverty. In 2021, youth (15-24 years old) unemployment rate is 27.1 % (25.5 % for males and 29.2 % for females). Compared to the previous year, youth unemployment rate has increased by 0.6 percentage points. [14]

The risk of poverty rate for 2019 by Eurostat is estimated to be 23%, where the highest rate of risk by target group is that of young people of the age of 18-24 years old by 27.2%. Furthermore, the severe material and social deprivation rate for 2019 is calculated to be 42.5% [15].

The closure of schools and universities and the shift to the online education presented challenges for youth and students. Around 11 thousand students, mainly those living in rural areas have been identified as not having access to online learning because of the lack of access to internet or digital devices at home [16]. According to the United Nation Covid-19 Socio-Economic Recovery & Response Plan, Roma children and children with learning difficulties and disabilities did not accessed online learning. Assessment report data that show 1 in 2 children with disabilities could not access education activities online [17]. Learning loss is estimated to be unavoidable and considerable, disproportionately affecting the disadvantaged, with a larger share of students likely to fall back into functional illiteracy and potentially dropping out of school altogether. [18].

[12] Ministry of Health and Social Protection, Updated information on Covid-19, 2021. <https://shendetesia.gov.al/koronavirusi-i-ri-dhe-masat-ndaj-tij/>

[13] International Labour Organisation, Overview of the informal economy in Albania, 2020

https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---europe/---ro-geneva/---sro-budapest/documents/genericdocument/wcms_751313.pdf

[14] INSTAT, Labour Market, 2021 <http://www.instat.gov.al/media/10021/press-release-labour-market-2021.pdf>

[15] EUROSTAT, Living conditions in Europe - poverty and social exclusion, 2020

https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Living_conditions_in_Europe_-_poverty_and_social_exclusion#Key_findings

[16] UNICEF, UN ALBANIA Covid-19 SOCIO-ECONOMIC RECOVERY & RESPONSE PLAN, 2020

<https://www.unicef.org/albania/sites/unicef.org.albania/files/2020>

<07/UN%20ALB%20Socio%20Economic%20Recovery%20%26%20Response%20Plan%201.0.pdf>

[17] World Vision Albania, 2020 https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/COVID_Assesment_Report_WVA_final.pdf

[18] UNICEF, UN ALBANIA Covid-19 SOCIO-ECONOMIC RECOVERY & RESPONSE PLAN, 2020

<https://www.unicef.org/albania/media/3101/file/UN%20ALBANIA%20Covid-19%20SOCIO-ECONOMIC%20RECOVERY%20%26%20RESPONSE%20PLAN.pdf>



Impacts on the people

In 2021 the education system returned to its normal functioning, while respecting the prevention measures such as obligatory wearing of mask for all children and students. There is no official assessment report on the online education efficiency.

Assessment reports issued in 2020, show that mental health and psychological well-being, has the potential to be significantly impacted by the pandemic especially on those with pre-existing mental health problems. Furthermore, the number of request for mental health and psychosocial support counselling, directly or indirectly linked to Covid-19, increase by 30% [19].

The findings from the Rapid Gender Assessment conducted by UNWOMEN in 2020, to measure the socio-economic impact of Covid-19 on women and men, suggested an increase in burden of unpaid work, more economic insecurity and increased violence against women and girls during the pandemic.

During March – May 2020, the national help lines centres have received three times more calls by girls and women for help compared to the same period of 2019 [20]. Furthermore, 79% of women and girls, stated that the domestic violence has gotten worse as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic [21]. The Measuring the Shadow Pandemic: Violence Against Women during Covid-19, study indicates that there are strong linkages between income, employment and experiences of domestic violence. According to the report, women who said they experienced a decrease in income in the last year were more likely than women on average to have experiences forms of domestic violence, whether it was exclusively since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic or over their lifetime.

The MoHSP, took several measures to mitigate the risks of domestic violence such as revision of Protocol on managing domestic violence cases at local level through the Coordinated Referral Mechanism during the Covid-19 situation, tightening of penalties for domestic abuse in the Criminal Code as well including this target group as priority group in the economic supporting packages implemented by the government to respond to the pandemic situation. During 2019 -2020, the number of migrants and refugees that used Albania as a transition country was estimated at about 11,344 migrants and refugees. The closure of borders noted a decrease in movement of Albania's asylum seeker population. On the other hand, Albanian authorities during the pandemic situation have closed down migrant reception centres, which have left many stranded in the cold [22]

[19] ibid

[20] AWEN, 2020

<https://awenetwork.org/Covid-19-trefishohen-thirrjet-per-ndihme-per-dhune-ne-familje-prane-linjes-kombetare-116-117-deri-ne-6-urdhera-mbrojtje-ne-dite-vetem-ne-durres/?fbclid=IwAR12FM80L7ZqsgJbdY8kgy027QpkpCVNOINC-FmW8LAVm5CHHJnoaL8J50>

[21] UNWOMEN, VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN DURING Covid-19, 2021

<https://albania.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-03/Measuring-shadow-pandemic-Albania.pdf>

[22] Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor, 2020

https://euromedmonitor.org/en/article/3543?fbclid=IwAR0t6JldBgzcKXXJMMSQakDRsA_vbXRdJyBidVN2E3LSpi7ujT2RysSps



Government implemented intervention to address economic and social challenges from Covid-19

The government adopted three financial packages of a combined size of 45 billion ALL to support people and companies affected by the pandemic situation, (4% of GDP) [23].

The first financial package consisted of:

- ALL 6.5 billion (approx. EUR 52 million) to alleviate loss of incomes of all people affected by the Covid-19 crises, supporting employed people to maintaining their jobs, to support the unemployed people through the increase of unemployment payment rate and to support the rest through the social economic aid schemes. Also permanent erasure of late payment interest for active debtors who are current energy consumers and for families or small businesses with a financial effect of up to ALL 15 billion (EUR 121 million).
- ALL 10 billion (EUR 80 million) of sovereign guarantee for companies with difficulties paying employee salaries.
- Rescheduling of income taxes for all businesses with turnover of up to EUR 118 million that have ceased activities during the Covid-19 period.
- Postponement of balance sheet submissions for a period up to 1 June 2020 for businesses submitting balance sheets to the National Business Centre on line or directly.

Regarding health and other measures:

- ALL 2.5 billion (EUR 20 million) for medical equipment and materials for medical staff.
- ALL 2 billion (EUR 16 million) for humanitarian operations.
- ALL 1 billion (EUR 8 million) as a reserve fund to the Council of Ministers for any unforeseen emergency.

The second financial package consisted of:

- State guarantee of EUR 138 million for tourism, the garment industry and manufacturing businesses, provided as a risk-sharing mechanism between the government and banks.
- Postponement of due date payment for tax on profits instalments for almost all enterprises
- ALL 40 000 (EUR 323) to current employees and laid-off employees under specific conditions

The third financial support consisted of:

- Provision of minimum wage for public transport workers who resumed work one month later than others totaling ALL 135 million (EUR 1 million).
- Employment promotion programme to cover a part of reemployment costs for businesses.
- Allocation of ALL 14.2 billion (0.8 % of GDP) towards Covid-19 related spending, including treatment, wage increases for healthcare workers and increase in social assistance payments.

Additional measures taken in this frame were also postponement of rent payment for some groups, including students, individuals with rental contracts, low-income natural/legal persons who have a notarial lease contract and Creation of a financial anti-Covid-19 fund The government also initiated a humanitarian operation to support individuals and families in need during the Covid-19 pandemic with food and health drugs from which 263 093 families/individual are reported to be benefiting [24]. During 2021, with the removal of restrictions, the government implemented policies on Covid-19 were focused on the vaccination of the entire population.

[23] OCDE, Impact of Covid-19 in Albania
<https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/933637d0-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/933637d0-en#section-d1e11363>

[24] Government of Albania, 2020
<https://www.kryeministria.al/newsroom/operacioni-humanitar-ka-mbeshtetur-263-mije-familje-individe/>

Role and involvement of civil society in policy and decision-making in response to Covid-19 pandemic

Ownership

The Ministry of Health and Social Protection and the Public Health Institution prepared three strategic documents in response to Covid-19 situation in the country:

- (1) The Action Plan for Prevention, Preparation and Response against COVID – 19 which foresees measures for the prevention, preparation and response to Covid-19 situation;
- (2) The Reopening Strategy that identifies four main phases for the reopening of the economy based on recommendations from the WHO and the country risk assessment ; and
- (3) The response Strategy for Autumn–Winter 2020–2021 setting strategic objectives for responding to SARS–CoV–2 pandemic for this period. [25].

There are two main bodies established to respond to Covid-19:

- (1) The Task Force for the prevention of infection spread by the new Coronavirus; and
- (2) and the Ad – Hoc Committee for the Spread of New Coronavirus Infection. The Ad – Hoc Committee consists of 12 members, all coming from health institutions and agencies, while the Task Force consists of 10 members who represent public health institutions, one member from WHO sited in Albania and one from the Department of Border Police and Migration.

Neither of the above mentioned strategic documents nor the established response bodies to the pandemic situation, have not been prepared or created based on a multi-stakeholder participation from the parliament, civil society, private sector, subnational government and development partners in these bodies. There is no participation in the design, implementation, and monitoring of national strategies and policies for Covid-19 response. From the other hand, there are no cases of policies and strategies proposed/raised by CSOs that are actually reflected or integrated in Covid-19 policies and strategies.

[25] Ministry of Health and Social Protection, Updated information on COVID-19, 2020
<https://shendetesia.gov.al/koronavirusi-i-ri-dhe-masat-ndaj-tij/>

Role and involvement of civil society in policy and decision-making in response to Covid-19 pandemic

Inclusive partnership

Despite the Law on Right to Information and the Law on Public Consultation enable CSOs and citizens the right to access relevant government information and participate in relevant public policy making processes, there is no record of CSOs or other stakeholders participation and consultation in the design, implementation, and monitoring of Covid-19 response national strategies and policies. Furthermore, during the lockdown, media and human rights organizations have accused the government of monopolizing the information related to the Covid-19 pandemic. [26] They felt repressed by the government, making it impossible to obtain independent information and totally limiting the verification of press releases. During 2020, a new legislation package on anti-defamation was adopted by the Government, raising concerns, as stated in the European Commission 2020 Progress Report for Albanian, “as to its potential negative impact on freedom of expression” [27].

Regarding donors support, the Ministry of Health and Social Protection (MoHSP) has conducted online coordination meetings with donors to increase support in response to the Covid-19. Donors support was mainly channelled through project assistance and budget support. IMF has provided US\$190.5 million financial assistance under the Rapid Financing Instrument, providing critical resources for the health care sector and supports jobs and businesses. The European Union supported Albania with EUR 50 million, of which EUR 4 million in support to the health sector, and EUR 46 million consisted of budget support to assist the social and economic recovery. The EU will also provide support at the macro-economic level, through an additional amount of EUR 180 million in favourable terms loans. Several bilateral donors, including China, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, the United States (list not exhaustive), have provided diagnostics and medical supplies to Albania during the pandemic [28].

Though, there are two dedicated section on the website of the Ministry of Finance and Economy and the website of the Ministry of Health and Social Protection, on Covid-19 national response, there are no aggregated reports or real-time database information on donations commitments and transfers, except for sporadic news on established agreements. There is no comprehensive progress report on the implementation of national strategy response on Covid-19, from the responsible bodies. On the MEF, a screenshot of the beneficiaries from the allocation of financial packages is published up to 3.11.2020 while on the MoHSP statistical data on the number of infections, vaccinations, deaths and recoveries are updated regularly.

[26] 360.al, <https://360grade.al/341555/keshilli-shqiptar-i-medias-qendrimi-i-rames-eshte-i-rrezikshem-qeveria-po-censuron-informacionin-per-situaten-me-koronavirusin/>

[27] European Commission, 2020
https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/system/files/2020-10/albania_report_2020.pdf

[28] UN ALBANIA Covid-19 SOCIO-ECONOMIC RECOVERY & RESPONSE PLAN
<https://www.unicef.org/albania/media/3101/file/UN%20ALBANIA%20Covid-19%20SOCIO-ECONOMIC%20RECOVERY%20&%20RESPONSE%20PLAN.pdf>

Inclusive partnership

Based on Partners Albania, Annual Report, during 2020, a donation amount of 103,688,004 ALL (844,411 EUR) was recorded [29]. Compared to 2019 data on philanthropic activity in Albania, there is with a significant decrease of donations, contributed to the increased solidarity and donations shown during 2019 due to 26th November, earthquake that left Albania devastating.

Regarding the CSOs access to resources, during the pandemic, the legal and regulatory environment in place was neutral. There were no legal barrier for CSOs to work with marginalized populations and at-risk group as far as they follow the state protocols measures of Covid-19. In the frame of the measures taken to cope with the Covid-19 pandemic situation, the Albanian government took several legal initiatives, some of which, according to the government itself, in the verbal note sent to the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, on 15th of March 2020, may be interpreted as a violation of article 8 and article 11 (freedom of assembly and organization) of ECHR. Through the Normative Act no. 3 dated March 15, 2020, amended, all public activities, including gatherings and assemblies were closed until the end of pandemic, to protect public health. Until December 2021, the MoHSP issued 19 acts, amending [30] the Order no. 633, dated 17.11.2020 "On the prohibition of gathering in open and closed spaces", as a preventive measure in the pandemic situation of Covid-19, imposing restriction to the right of peaceful assemblies.

Despite the restrictions, during 2020, people organized or participated in assemblies. 399 assemblies in total were organized for different issues, including the opposition of the normative acts and orders issued by the MoHSP to prevent the spreading of Covid-19 infection. 112 organizers and participants in 10 assemblies were detained by the Albanian State Police for the violation of different criminal offenses in the Criminal Code [31]. In regard to the situation created by the measures to prevent the spread of Covid-19, and their impact on the right of citizens to free assembly, The Ombudsman, issued a letter with recommendations on necessary measures that public institutions should take to respect the right to freedom of peaceful assembly.

The letter provides a set of recommendations stressing necessary measures that the State Police should take in order to interrupt the up-to-date practice of not allowing non-mass gatherings indoors or outdoors, as well as to guarantee the right of journalists to report events on assemblies and other activities on this nature. Furthermore, on June 2021, the Parliamentary election were held, marking a series of identified violations of preventing measures [32].

In addition, the government proposed various amendments in the Criminal Code for the prevention of the Covid-19 pandemic. The amendments criminalize some forms of citizens' disobedience to the measures during the state of emergency or natural disaster and some forms of violation of quarantine rules to prevent the spread of the infectious diseases.

[29] Partners Albania, Annual Report, 2020

http://partnersalbania.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Annual_Report_2020web.pdf

[30] Gazette, n.d.

<https://qbz.gov.al/eli/urdher/2020/11/17/633/5c8cale2-0838-4488-9f0b-2ecfbc756f45>

[31] Partners Albania, Monitoring Matrix on Enabling Environment for Civil Society, 2020

https://resourcecentre.al/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/MM-Albania-Country-Report-2020_FINAL.pdf

[32] Albanian Helsinki Committee, Election monitoring report for the Albanian Assembly 2021

https://ahc.org.al/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Raport-Monitorimi-Zgjedhje-per-Kuvendin-Prill-2021-_5-Bashki.pdf

Inclusive partnership

The proposed amendments included fines and imprisonment sentences of up to 15 years for those violating quarantine and curfews imposed under the state of emergency, being infected or not by the virus. These amendments were strongly opposed by a group of 30 CSOs that issued a public declaration considering that the proposed amendments infringe fundamental human rights and freedoms. The Ombudsman and the President also took stand in similar opinions regarding the legal amendments. Moreover, approval of the amendment through an accelerated procedure by the parliament was found in contradiction with the Albanian Constitution (article 83, point3). As a result of these efforts, the government backed up from the initial proposals and eased some measures.

The Covid-19 pandemic has further weakened the financial stability of the civil society, already weak due to unfavourable legal and fiscal framework [33]. Additionally, lack of capacities and skills of the sector to access and use of technology to effectively perform their work, arise [34]. According to 2020 Civil Society Sustainability Index, small and remote CSOs had difficulties in adapting to being cut off from their constituencies, switching to a digital format, and accessing funding, thereby threatening their sustainability [35]. Public funding allocated to CSOs by public institutions decreased by almost 40%, hardly meeting the needs of the sector to address Covid-19 related issues. According to the Monitoring Matrix on Enabling Environment, 2020 Report, state support to CSOs, to alleviate the pandemic situations consisted mostly of postponement of reporting and extension of tax payment deadlines (stated by 23% of CSOs). Furthermore, there is no legal framework or regulation in place with specific provisions that authorize state authorities to provide non-financial support to CSOs.

CSOs were not included in "COVID-19 Packages" enacted by the Government in response to the Covid-19 pandemic situation, with the reasoning that their activity was not affected by the measures taken. Partners Albania, Emergency Assessment Report show that 20 NPOs out of 90, could not pay staff salaries during the emergency situation and 37 NPOs had no funds covering their administrative costs [36]. Despite that, the majority of CSOs have adapted to the new reality and currently are fully engaged with online and "hybrid" activities. They have been very active in responding to the needs of their beneficiaries by developing alternative approaches to deliver their services to individuals, families, and groups in need. They have supported the government, especially the local government, in the identification and delivery of support provided to the marginalized groups in society.

In this regard, based on a needs assessment with CSOs, on April 2020, Partners Albania and the National Resource Centre for Civil Society provided a support package of rapid support for the sector. The support package included two main interventions: (1) One-year access on the Zoom Platform, the costs of which are covered by Partners Albania and the National Resource Centre for Civil Society in Albania and (2) online training for the use of a series of online platforms and creative tools. Given the wide range of applications, tools and platforms available, in most cases it is difficult to choose the right one. As part of these trainings, participants have the opportunity to get acquainted with the platforms, assess which ones are appropriate and most economical for the needs they have.

[34] European Commission, 2021

https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/albania-report-2021_en

[35] Partners Albania, Support NPO sector adaptability to Covid-19 emergency – Assessment Report, 2020

https://resourcecentre.al/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Support_NPO_Sector_Adaptability_to_Covid-19_Emergency_Assessment_Report.pdf

[36] Institute for Democracy and Mediation, Civil Society Sustainability Index 2020, <https://idm.albania.org/download/23569/>

Good practices of CSOs

Policy advocacy



“*The penalties proposed in the Criminal Code for the prevention of the Covid-19 pandemic violate the fundamental rights and freedoms of the citizens*
Civil Society Organizations Public Opinion

Under the Covid-19 the state of emergency and prevention rules in controlling the outspread of the virus, the government proposed various legal measures, including issuing of penalties in case disobedience to the measures during the state of emergency or natural disaster.

So in April, 2020 the Albanian Assembly proposed various changes in the Criminal Code to criminalize certain forms of disobedience of citizens to the measures of competent state bodies during a state of emergency or a state of natural disaster (Article 242/1) and certain forms of violating quarantine rules for preventing the spread of infectious diseases (242/2). The proposed amendments included fines and imprisonment sentences of up to 15 years for those violating quarantine and curfews imposed under the state of emergency, being infected or not by the virus.

The proposed criminal penalties were assessed as disproportionate, in disrespecting the principle of humanity provided in Article 1/c of the Criminal Code, and in infringe of fundamental human rights and the freedoms.

In this situation a group of 30 NPOs working mostly in the field of human rights issued a public statement[37] addressed to the Assembly of Albania, requesting to overturn in principle of the proposed amendments, especially of the article 242/2, on the ground that the proposed changes were also in violation of the Constitution and the basic rights and freedoms of citizens. The civil society request was supported also by the Ombudsman.

After revision for harmonization with the human rights, the changes on the Criminal Code were approved, but considerate by the Venice Commission as unnecessary[38]. This was not the first case where the civil society organisation had shown a strong joint stand during the pandemic, regarding various legal initiatives taken by the government in total lack of consultation with stakeholders and in violation of the right to information and consultation of the public.

[37] Retrieved in <https://resourcecentre.al/sq/deklarate-nga-organizatat-e-shoqerise-civile-mbi-denimet-e-propozuara-ne-kodin-penal-per-parandalimin-e-pandemise-covid19/>

[38] Retrieved in <https://faktoje.al/ndryshimet-ne-kodin-penal-a-po-abuzohet-me-gjendjen-e-fatkeqesise/>

Good practices of CSOs

Responding to basic needs of constituencies



“The Friendly Quarantine Diary

House of Color Centre, ARSIS organization

Nisma për Ndryshim Shoqëror, ARSIS is a Non-Governmental Organization, specializing in the social support of children, youth and families that are in difficulty or danger or vulnerable situation and in the advocacy of their rights.

The main target is the prevention of children and youth marginalization, the elaboration of policies which defend children and youth rights and the active social support towards disadvantaged children and young people. NISMA ARSIS has established the first model of providing Multidisciplinary Services to protect children from abuse, neglect, violence and exploitation in the Municipality of Tirana in the center “House of Colors” in the Administrative Unit no.7 in 2010 with the support of UNICEF and Municipality of Tirana. The model established as multi-functional center developed its services in accordance to the needs of children at risk covering the gaps of the system. It also serves as emergency shelter centre.

Covid-19 measures, forced children and their families supported by the centre in isolation causing difficulties in living conditions, lack of income, and means of providing food. Parents were not allowed to work with recycle materials collected from trash containers, and the poverty conditions were worsening each passing day. Respecting the government strict measures of security, children could not be part of daily programmes for early childhood development, mothers could not come to the Centre and take the psychosocial support that they needed and were eager to benefit from, as the only opportunity to change their way of thinking and self-esteem. As a response to the situation, centers’ staff proposed a distance e-learning programme which could reach out to each family, offering them an interactive tool

to apply with their children called “The Friendly Quarantine Diary”. As part of this new service, children’s were given their own individual notebook where they verbalize thoughts, feelings and emotions in their own ways of drawing, playing or writing. The new idea were embraced by the parents with the hope that it would ease their children’s situation, without knowing how it would also impact their lives. Through online interfaces safe communication channel provided allowing sharing of knowledge, information, enabling so the continuance of the centres programs while also sharing the purest feelings, children’s glimpses of emotions.

The teachers at the Centre called the parents every day sharing daily activities. Child friendly language explanation was used to raise awareness for the new dangerous environment. Animation programmes for children and parents who had difficulties in their education, positive parenting methods, dynamic learning approaches, families coping mechanisms was also provided with psychologists, social workers and volunteers. During the earthquake and the emergency situation caused by Covid-19, the Center reached to support more than 2000 children and their families with psychosocial support, protection measures and direct support in partnership with United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), Municipality of Tirana and Durres and Ministry of Health and Social Protection.

Good practices of CSOs

Community mobilization and other transformative actions

Different & Equal is a nonprofit organization dedicated to providing high quality reintegration services for victims of trafficking, exploitation and abuse, and to improving the legal, institutional and social context to prevent and counter these violations of human rights.

D&E is part of the National Referral Mechanism for victims of trafficking as well as one of the shelters that offers reintegration services for victims of trafficking and their children including residential and community services. Under the Covid-19 restrictions the Centre faced a series of difficulties in delivering its services. Isolation and anti-covid measures affected the entire process of providing services to beneficiaries and made access to these services difficult, especially for those packages of services that are provided in collaboration and coordination with public institutions. Furthermore, the new difficulties in reporting the violence cases were faced. In a situation of isolation, traffickers and abusers increased the pressure on the victims not to denounce or testify in court. Also the pandemic increased the vulnerability of victims of trafficking, thus becoming an easy prey for recruiters and traffickers. In this situation the center staff took several efforts to adapt the provision of services to the new situation, introducing online services for all services that did not required in person contact and meeting such as of online psychological and legal counseling, health care information and education etc. Despite that, all the other reintegration services provided for the centers' residents such as professional courses or employment, fully stopped.

Further measures were required, in coordination with all members of the National Referral Mechanism and also for provision of standardised services for the victims of violence and trafficking. In April 2020, D&E as member and coordinator of the National Anti-Trafficking Shelters Coalition, was part of the multi-sectorial working group in drafting of the Protocol For The Operation of Residential Centers

Public And Non-Public, Who Provide Accommodation Services (Shelters) For Victims Of Domestic Violence and Trafficking in the Situation Of The Pandemic Of Covid-19. During the consultation process of the draft protocol, D&E issued various suggestions regarding the provision of measures and services in the context of the protection of victims of trafficking. The given suggestions were accepted and included in the final draft of the Protocol. The protocol for the operation of residential centers in the pandemic situation of Covid-19 was an indispensable tool helping to take measures in a unified and standardized way. Additionally, D&E has closely collaborated with other government institutions that provide services to crime victims and their children such as Tirana Municipality, Justice Institutions, as well as other institutions and agencies, monitoring and continually recommending better services provision and conditions.

Some of the recommendations include facilitation of specialized support services provision through the preparation of orientation documents, and through continuous cooperation for the provision of services according to the needs of the beneficiaries; ongoing financial support for disinfectant materials and equipment, as well as for quick response in case of detection of infected cases; support with a financial package dedicated to victims of crime as well as to other vulnerable categories, including the reimbursement of the salary of those who have stopped working as a result of the situation.

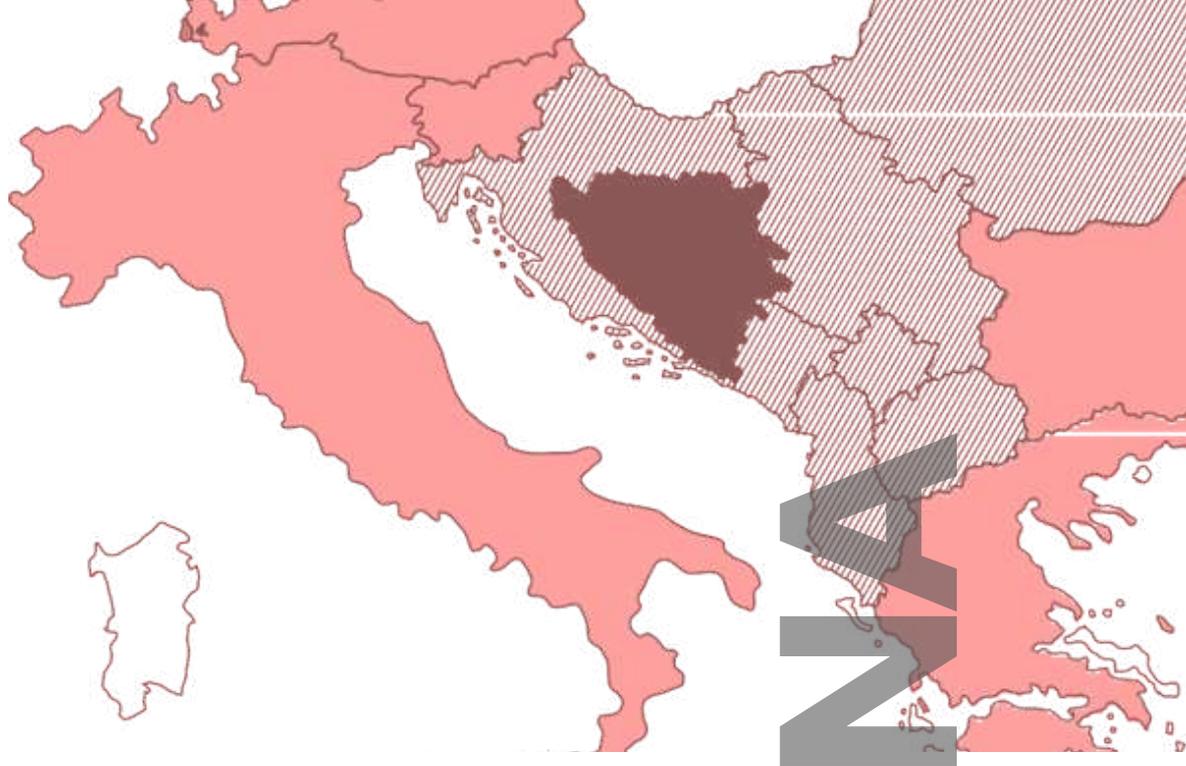


COUNTRY CASE STUDY
REPORT

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

PREPARED BY
CENTRE FOR CIVIC INITIATIVES

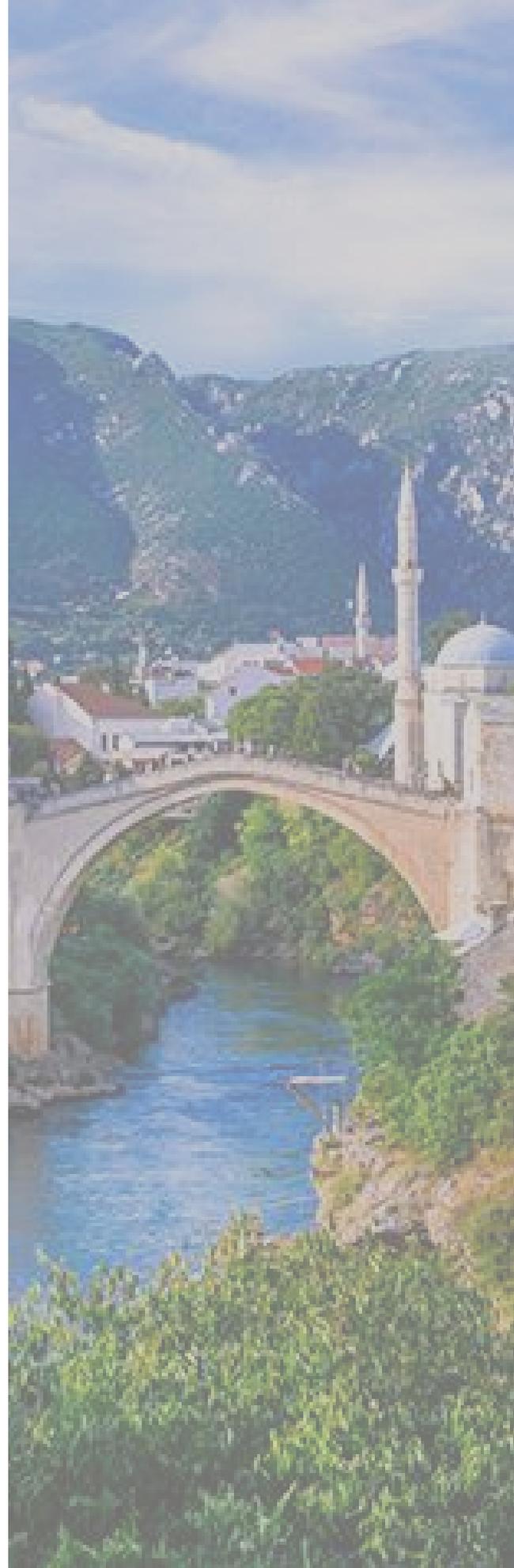
BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA



General overview of the country

Bosnia and Herzegovina has a bicameral legislature and a three-member presidency made up of one member from each of the three major ethnic groups. However, the central government's power is highly limited, as the country is largely decentralized. It comprises two autonomous entities—the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska—and a third unit, the Brčko District, which is governed by its own local government. The Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina furthermore consists of 10 cantons (each of the cantons has its own government and parliament).

According to the 2013 Census, Bosnia and Herzegovina had a population of 3,532,159. 50.94 percent of this number are women and 49.06 percent are male. Most of the population falls into the 15–64 age group and the country has a high dependency ratio.[1] Population density is 68 inhabitants per km². Since the 2013 Census BiH registered a high degree of population emigration that cannot be seen through the official statistics. However, this can be seen through Eurostat's data on the number of issued permanent permits. Moreover, in its Labour Force Survey for 2018 the BiH Agency for Statistics published information that the total population in Bosnia and Herzegovina was 2.7 million.[2]



[1] https://bhas.gov.ba/data/Publikacije/Bilteni/2021/NUM_00_2020_TB_1_BS.pdf

[2] https://bhas.gov.ba/data/Publikacije/Bilteni/2018/LAB_00_2018_Y1_0_BS.pdf

The socio-economic impact of Covid-19 in the country



Impacts on the economy

The Covid-19 pandemic has had negative impacts on the economy of Bosnia and Herzegovina according to the most macroeconomic indicators such as employment, gross domestic product, industrial production, and foreign trade exchange, returning the economy to the rates it had several years ago. This analysis of the economic indicators will show the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, with reference to the situation today.

Many layoffs, primarily in the Federation of BiH led to an additional negative socio-economic impact whose consequences will be felt in the years to come. The absence of the measures to support the economy at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic caused a sharp decline in the number of employed workers in the Federation of BiH. The number of employed workers in the Federation of BiH decreased by 26,876 employees within only 50 days.[3] After a partial recovery, the decrease in the number of employed workers in the Federation of BiH was 13 990 by the end of 2020. Observed by sectors, 9 out of 10 laid-off workers come from four key economic sectors such as Accommodation and Food Services, Manufacturing Industry, Wholesale and Retail, and Art, Entertainment and Recreation Industry. Recovery has occurred in 2021, and as of November 22, 2021, the number of employed workers increased by 12 936; however, this number is still not sufficient to take the Federation of BiH to the level before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. According to the Tax Administration's data, it would be necessary to employ another 1 054 workers for the Federation to reach the level it had on March 16, 2020. To explain the pandemic's negative impact on the number of employees in simpler terms, 616 days into the pandemic the number of employed workers in the Federation of BiH has not returned to the number this entity had at the beginning of the pandemic.

Unlike the Federation of BiH, where the lack of timely government measures led to a significant loss of jobs, in the Republika Srpska there was no significant loss of jobs due to the pledge of financial support, which can be seen from the data on the number of employed workers. At the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, the number of employed workers decreased by 3,997 workers and then increased. By the end of the year, the number of employed workers in Republika Srpska was higher by 703 workers than at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic[4]. In 2021 there is a positive trend of increase in the number of employees, and as of October 2021, the number of workers increased by 5343 compared to December 2020.

Observed collectively for the level of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the net decrease of workers was 13 287 in 2020, only for this number to increase to 18 279 in 2021, which is the result of recovery seen on the markets in the European Union and increased international demand.

[3] <http://www.pufbih.ba/v1/novosti/obavjestenja>

[4] <https://www.fondpiors.org/statisticki-bilteni/>

The negative impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic were also reflected in a decline in the gross domestic product of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The largest decline was reflected in the decline in household consumption during the second quarter, which can be explained by negative expectations and uncertainty due to lack of the government measures. Given the expected decline in household consumption, a timely government's response should have aimed at strengthening government spending through assistance to the economy and citizens, to mitigate the decline on time. However, in the second quarter of 2020, there was also a decline in government expenditures (1,1%) and gross investments (14%).

Gross Domestic Product BiH growth rates had a sharp and deep decline in 2020, where there were three consecutive quarters of negative economic growth. By definition, when a country has two consecutive quarters of negative growth, technically it can be said that a recession has occurred. When we followed the trends of the economic growth rate in relation to the previous quarter were monitored ($Q / Q-1$), we noticed a deep economic decline of 10.4% that was recorded in the second quarter of 2020, while growth was recorded in other quarters, which explains why there was growth in the following quarter due to a comparison with the second quarter when a deep decline was recorded. Bosnia and Herzegovina is statistically emerge from the recession only in the first quarter of 2021, as it recorded quarterly growth of 1.5%. However, comparing the indicators on an annual basis, the decline in 2020 was about 4.5%, which is a significant decline for Bosnia and Herzegovina considering that since 2007 the country has not had such rates of economic growth.[5]

Industrial production also recorded a sharp decline during 2020, which was particularly pronounced during the lockdown in March, April, May, and June. In these months, the rates of decline in the level of industrial production ranged from 9.9% to 15.9%, with the highest values of decline in April and May. At the annual level, the decline in industrial production was about 6.5%, which is a significant decline, although by the end of 2020 there was a smaller decline, and in December 2020 there was an increase by 2.8% compared to December 2019[6]. The changes in the trends of industrial production are directly related to the trends in international trade, which indicates that the decline in industrial production was reflected in exports from Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, the economic recovery and return on the markets in the European Union, industrial production recovered in the period January -October 2021, as seen in the monthly growth rates. Observed collectively, at the level of 2021, industrial production increased by 11.6%.

The level of international trade shows how strong was the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the economy of Bosnia and Herzegovina. According to the export indicator, the level of international trade returned to the level in 2017, when approximately the same level of trade was recorded in those years. According to the export indicator, the level of international trade returned to the level in 2017, when approximately the same level of trade was recorded in those years. According to the import indicator, there was a sharp drop from 19.5 to 16.9 billion KM.[7] Although it may seem that the coverage of imports by exports has improved in this way, a large decline in imports also signals a decline in household consumption due to the strong link between these variables. Ultimately, according to the import indicator, there has been a return to the level in 2016, when approximately the same level of import trends was recorded.

[5] <https://bhas.gov.ba/Calendar/Category/12>

[6] <https://bhas.gov.ba/Calendar/Category/18>

[7] <https://bhas.gov.ba/Calendar/Category/11>

In 2021, due to the strong growth of foreign demand on the markets in the European Union and the problems in the chain distributions from Asia, there is a record-high growth of exports from Bosnia and Herzegovina. Exports in the first three quarters of 2021 were at 10.05 billion KM, by almost 1.2 billion KM more than in the same period in 2018, which was the record-high year for exports. In relation to 2020, the exports in the same period were higher by almost 2.5 billion KM. Besides the adverse economic effects, there are also adverse social effects as shown in the data provided by the Ministry of Civil Affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina for 2020[8] and 2021[9], from January 1, 2020 to November 23, 2021. According to the data of the Ministry of Civil Affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina, from February 2021 when the immunization process began in BiH, until November 4, 2021, slightly over 24% of the population of Bosnia and Herzegovina are fully vaccinated.[10] It is important to emphasize that the share of vaccinated citizens varies across BiH. For example, 49.1% of adult citizens (165 841)[11] in Sarajevo Canton are fully vaccinated, while this number in Republika Srpska stands around 27.3%.[12] Bosnia and Herzegovina has 270,498 confirmed cases of Covid-19 resulting in 12,338 deaths. The number of performed Covid-19 tests is 1 372 920.



Government implemented intervention to address economic and social challenges from Covid-19

The authorities' response to the pandemic's negative impacts was insufficient. The state-level allocated a total of 37,747,000 KM to the health sector in BiH. This amount was or will be forwarded to the entities' and cantonal finance ministries and the Finance Directorate of the Brčko District.

Support to the economy at the state level failed, as the initiatives to shift the due date for VAT payments to the end of the month or to abolish excise duty on alcohol used in manufacturing disinfectants were rejected.[13][14]

Through the institutions of BiH, Republika Srpska realized KM 254,257,415 in loans in 2020:[15]

- The IMF's loan in the amount of KM 244,271,730
- The World Bank's (Emergency Covid-19 Response Project in the amount of KM 9,985,685 (EUR 5,105,600)

Total KM 76, 212, 833 were allocated to support the economy, while the total assistance was KM 216,386,025.

The Federation of BiH has through the institutions of BiH realized KM 400,605,638 in loans from the International Monetary Fund. Of this amount, KM 200,000,000 KM of grants were designated to the cantons in the FBiH. In total, the amount of KM 159,134,100 KM was allocated to aid the economy, while the total assistance amounted to KM 445,519,907[16]

[8] <http://mcp.gov.ba/publication/read/epidemioloska-slika-Covid-19?pagelid=3>

[9] <http://mcp.gov.ba/publication/read/epidemioloska-slika-novo?pagelid=3#>

[10] <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/bih-vaccine-unistavanje-vakcinacija/31555241.html>

[11] <http://vlada.ks.gov.ba/aktuelnosti/novosti/zavod-za-javno-zdravstvo-ks-do-danas-u-kantonu>

[12] <https://ba.voanews.com/a/u-entitetu-republika-srpska-najavljena-vakcinacija-tre%C4%87om-do-zom-protiv-Covid-19/6267286.html>

[13] <https://www.parlament.ba/publication/read/15975?pagelid=238>

[14] <https://www.parlament.ba/session/OSessionDetails?id=2003&ConverterId=1>

[15] <https://www.cpi.ba/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Odgovor-centralne-vlasti-BiH-na-pandemiju-Covid19.pdf>

[16] <https://www.cpi.ba/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Odgovor-centralne-vlasti-BiH-na-pandemiju-Covid19.pdf>



Impacts on the people

The UNDP and UNICEF's survey on the social impact of Covid-19 in Bosnia and Herzegovina conducted initially in July 2020 and then repeated in the period November–December finds multiple deteriorations of the pandemic's impact on Bosnia and Herzegovina and its citizens. The studies reveal that vulnerable groups in the society such as single parents, children, women, persons with disabilities or chronic illness, members of ethnic minorities and returnees, Roma, LGBTQ+, and the poor were worst hit by the crisis. According to the reports, 44.6% of households reported a worsened financial situation, whereof 12% experienced sizeable difficulties. Food consumption was reduced in 28.6% of families with children due to their worsened financial situation. In addition, unemployment among women rose as well as the need for parents to adapt to online schooling where 37.4% of the surveyed households expressed difficulties with transition to online schooling due to the lower quality of education, poorer organization of classes and inadequate technological devices for successful learning. Overall, the survey shows that the institutional response and readiness to such situations needs to improve through investments, better coordination, and preparation and that it is necessary to strengthen the collaboration among different sectors in the country, especially during crises, so that all BiH citizens including vulnerable groups in the society have equal access to the services needed. [17]

From the above we can conclude:

- According to most macroeconomic indicators, the Covid-19 pandemic has had adverse impacts on the economy of Bosnia and Herzegovina.
- In total for the level of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the net decrease of workers in 2020 was 13,287.
- On annual basis, a GDP decline in 2020 was around 4.5%, which is a significant decline for Bosnia and Herzegovina considering that the country has not had such economic growth rates since 2007.
- Industrial production also recorded a sharp decline by 6.5% in 2020 on an annual basis, with a more significant decline during the lockdown in April and May when it was 15.9%.
- According to the international trade indicator, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, Bosnia and Herzegovina regressed to the level in 2016 in terms of imports and the level in 2017 in terms of exports.
- The 2021 indicators indicate economic recovery, as seen in a significant surge in the number of employed workers, growth of industrial production, and a record level of realized exports.
- Bosnia and Herzegovina has 270 498 confirmed cases of Covid-19 and 12 388 deaths. Thus far, the country performed 1 372 920 tests.

[17] <https://www.unicef.org/bih/en/stories/social-impact-assessment-covid-19-bosnia-and-herzegovina>

Role and involvement of civil society in policy and decision-making in response to Covid-19 pandemic

Ownership

The Covid-19 Pandemics that was declared globally on January 30, 2021, has caused a chain of reactions in BiH. Since the very beginning of the crisis, the country's response reflected its complex system of competence (thirteen governments and parliaments at the state level, two entities, and ten cantons, with an additional administrative unit – the Brčko District). The response to the Covid-19 crisis in BiH began even before the emergence of the first cases of infection in the country. The crisis headquarters and coordination bodies were formed at the level of the entities (Republika Srpska (RS) and Federation of BiH (FBiH)), to monitor the situation in the world and prepare for the protection of the population and adequate response. It is good to mention that the Constitution of BiH does not provide the possibility to introduce emergency at the state level, so this competence falls within the competences of BiH entities (the FBiH and the RS) and the Brčko District.



In the Republika Srpska, the initial composition of the “Coordination Body for Planning, Implementation, and Monitoring of the Activities Related to Emergence of the New Virus” had eleven (11) members^[18]. Representatives of the RS Chamber of Commerce and the RS Union of Employers' Association occasionally participated in the work of this Coordination Body. The RS also had a special Headquarters for Monitoring the Virus' Adverse Impacts on the Economy of the Republika Srpska”, providing the information relevant for creating the measures to protect the economy and workers. In the Federation, these activities were performed by the Headquarters of the FBiH Health Ministry that was formed one day after the WHO declared the pandemic. This headquarter was formed under the FBiH Law on Health Care, and in March 2020 it created the Covid-19 Crisis Preparedness and Response Plan of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Tasked with the implementation of the plan were the FBiH Ministry of Health and the FBiH Institute for Public Health. This Crisis Plan dealt primarily with protocols for monitoring the epidemiological situation, movement of the virus, testing, a journey of an infected person, and monitoring his/her contacts to control the situation. The plan was created mostly according to the instructions provided by WHO and other expert bodies.

[18] Experts from the RS Ministry of Health and Social Care, Public Institute of Health, Health Insurance Fund, Administration of Inspection Affairs, University Clinical Center, Veterinary Institute “Dr Vaso Butozan”, Association of Family Physicians and Health Services Banja Luka.

Ownership



Concurrently, coordination among different levels of government in BiH was present, however, it was very limited by the competencies of the lower government levels. A state of the natural disaster was declared in BiH on March 17, 2020. This state of the natural disaster was declared in the F BiH in March, but terminated in May, only for a state of the epidemic to be declared in July. Republika Srpska declared a state of emergency[19] in March 2020 but abolished it at the end of May. The Brčko District declared a state of natural disaster in March 2020, followed by a state of the epidemic in July.



The urgency and seriousness of the situation implied fast decision making and introduction of measures that in the months that followed differed substantially across BiH. The basic mechanisms of citizen participation in decision-making were completely disregarded in this process. Introducing the state of emergency as a special form of operating in a crisis in RS allowed the RS Government to pass decrees based on the situation with the number of infected, movement of the virus, and recommendations of the health institutions. Following the declaration of the epidemic in RS, the Coordination Body for Planning, Implementing, and Monitoring Activities Related to the Outbreak of Covid-19 worked actively on implementing the Action Plan in the Case of Emergence of Risks/Suspicious for Spreading of the New Corona Virus in RS[20]. The instance controlling this Coordination Body was the RS headquarters[21] for Emergency Situations (formed in 2019). In the OSCE's special analysis addressing human rights and gender analysis in the Covid-19 crisis in BiH,[22] it was stated that women were not sufficiently represented in these bodies, despite the legal quotas and warnings issued by the BiH Agency for Gender Equality. The analysis lists the examples whereof the nine members of the FBiH Civil Protection Headquarter only two were women, and of 18 members of the Republika Srpska Headquarter for Emergency Situations, only five were women.[23] In addition to these entity-bodies, cantonal and municipal governments formed multisectoral crisis committees that implemented the measures introduced at the entity levels and monitored the situation at the local level trying to organize the available resources. However, we must emphasize that the basic activities implemented at the beginning of the pandemic did yield some results, and the WHO complimented BiH's response to the Covid-19 crisis.[24]

[19] Both entities, Federation of BiH and Republika Srpska, adopted the same restrictions concerning closing of kindergartens, schools and universities, curfew from 8 p.m. to 5 a.m, restricting the movement for persons above 65. During the emergency, only food stores, pharmacies, gas stations, post offices and banks remained open, with shorter working hours.

[20] <https://koronavirusrpskoj.com/najcesca-pitanja/>

[21] The Chair of this HQ is prime minister of RS Radovan Višković; his deputy is Minister of Interior, Chief of the Hq is a director of the RS Civil Protection Administration, Director of Police is a member of the HQ for matters concerning engagement of the police, and other 15 members are government ministers, assistant to the General Secretary of the RS Government for Information Sector – total 20 members

[22] Response to the Covid-19 crisis. Human Rights and Gender Analysis, OSCE Mission in BiH

[23] *ibid*

[24] Update: Coronavirus in BiH, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, May 2020

Ownership



The restriction measures imposed by the entity crises bodies targeted the entire population, but their effects can only be seen in the implementation of these measures. The decision-making practices did not include consultation with citizens, providers of social and other services, civil society organizations, professional associations, or different sector agencies. This significantly changed the status of vulnerable categories and their access to the achievement of their human rights. Decisions on the measures were made daily and changed primarily in line with the number of new cases and hospital occupancy rates, which were the real priorities in the first months of the Covid-19 crisis and subsequent waves of an increasing number of infected persons. However, the fact remains that the crisis HQs and working bodies never formally engaged civil society organizations to make the decision-making on both the response and recovery measures in line with human rights and the real needs of vulnerable groups of which the official institutions were often unaware. Nevertheless, sporadically but effectively, CSOs succeeded to correct and amend some of the decisions, fighting for the rights of their interest groups or beneficiaries.



This problem in BiH is not only the consequence of the Covid-19 crisis; it is the result of the crisis in civil society activity in BiH in general, one that has been present for a long time. On the whole, the pandemic's impact on CSOs, their activities, and resources was strong, and it significantly reduced the advocacy force that would have been directed at changing this situation and achieving better participation of CSOs in the decision-making processes. The response of CSOs in the first months focused on changing their working conditions, organization of operations, and adjusting their activities to the dramatically changing needs of the beneficiaries and economic survival in the conditions of changing cooperation with donors and other sources of funding. The Report on CSO Sustainability Index 2020 for Bosnia and Herzegovina states that the pandemics had a broad consequence on CSOs in BiH and that more than 50 percent of CSOs reported that the pandemic had a major or critical impact on their work, and over 70 percent projected that they could not withstand the situation for more than three months.[25].



The same report states that the European Commission in 2019 identified fourteen key priorities for the country moving forward, including the provision of a supportive environment for civil society. However, the Commission's 2020 report on BiH showed that no progress was made under that key priority, particularly in the adoption of European standards on freedoms of association and assembly, the lack of transparency in funding for CSOs, and meaningful engagement of civil society in policy consultations at all levels of decision making. Under such conditions and hindered communication with the decision-making bodies, CSOs focused on the urgent response to the needs of their beneficiaries, in line with their abilities and capacities.

[25] 2020 CSO Sustainability Index for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Center for Civil Society Promotion

Role and involvement of civil society in policy and decision-making in response to Covid-19 pandemic

Inclusive partnership

The success of the response to the Covid-19 crisis in BiH depends largely on international aid. This aid was provided through a few basic mechanisms of the EU, UN, IMF, and other international organizations, development programs, embassies, or governments of friendly countries immediately upon declaring the state of emergency in BiH. The information about these arrangements was available through information published by the managerial bodies or the entity crises headquarters, or press releases issued by donors and contracting bodies. This information could be found in press reports, on the portals, and governments' official websites, or specialized websites compiling the information about the activities and events in response to Covid-19. The information was also found in the analysis and studies targeting BiH and its response to the crisis.

According to the information, the largest interventions in BiH came from the intervention programs of the European Investment Banka for non-EU countries (5.2 billion) for mitigating the pandemic's effects. The Czech Republic and some other countries approved humanitarian assistance in the amount of 1.8 million KM; USAID launched a project to support BiH tourism and mitigate the pandemic's effects in the amount four times higher than the current projects in the energy sector; leaders of the leading political parties in BiH arrangements with the IMF EUR 330 million credit arrangement to fight the coronavirus. The EU approved through the UNDP additional 7 million Euro in assistance to urgent medical needs in BiH, while medical aid came from Turkey, Russia, and China[26]. On the other hand, we must mention that BiH does not have a national strategy for procurement of vaccines, and therefore the entities continue separate procurements.

The consolidated report for all UN agencies operating in BiH says the following: "After declaring the Covid-19 pandemic, the United Nations in Bosnia and Herzegovina provided immediate support to the workers on the first line of defense and healthcare systems, making sure no one was left out." In cooperation with the Ministry of Civil Affairs of BiH and relevant institutions in the healthcare sector, the UN completed a strategic plan for preparedness and response to COVID 10 for Bosnia and Herzegovina. In parallel, the United Nations adjusted strategies and programming according to the Framework Development Assistance of the United Nations 2016-2020 to support the health care system, economy, social protection, and education, and social cohesion using the [United Nations' Covid-19 Socio-Economic Response and Recovery Offer for Bosnia and Herzegovina](#). Based on this Offer, the United Nations in Bosnia and Herzegovina secure 79 million USD through changing the current and making new programs to support the measures against Covid-19, with the support of donors and partners.[27]

[26] Update: Koronavirus u BiH, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, maj 2020.godine

[27] 2020 Godišnji izvještaj o rezultatima UN-a u BiH, UN BiH

Inclusive partnership

Regarding the donor support to CSOs during the Covid-19 crisis, there are various examples of donors' responses, from those terminating their cooperation and funding to those who increased their assistance to organizations engaging in helping their beneficiaries and the public protect against the virus or overcome the consequences.

The characteristic of Bosnia and Herzegovina is the absence of cooperation and consultative mechanisms between government and civil society organizations. Public hearings and consultations with the public are more frequent at the local level (compared to higher levels), however, they are mostly about satisfying the norm, frequently not taking seriously citizens' comments made during the process. This has not changed in the processes involving strategies or decisions regarding response to Covid-19. There is in BiH a portal called e-Konsultacije that is envisioned as a platform allowing citizens participation in policymaking at the state level. This portal can publish all draft laws at the state level, which means that regular consultations take place only with regard to acts prepared by the Council of Ministers or the Parliamentary Assembly of BiH. Despite dozens of CSOs' initiatives, such a web communication portal between government and citizens was never established at the entity level where far more laws are made that are important for the socio-economic position of citizens.

At the same time, according to the Sustainability Index for CSO 2020, despite the presence of this platform for consultations at the level of BiH, many legal documents were adopted under urgency or shortened procedures in 2020. Under such procedures, there is no obligation to apply public consultations, and this was the case for the documents related to the Covid-19 crises. There is a record of several sectors attempting to engage in consultations with CSOs, but they were not fully functional. One of the examples is the cooperation between the RS Ministry of Family, Youth, Sports with youth organizations in Republika Srpska. Even though the Ministry keeps a register of these organizations, creates strategic documents for youth issues, and publishes once a year a call for funding youth projects, this cooperation is not used fully to achieve a functional dialogue and does not respond to the real needs of young people and their associations. It is only used formally to cover the minimum of the ministry's activities in the youth sector. However, in 2020 at the insistence of the network of youth centers in RS "M.O.C.A.R.T.," permanently employed persons from the registered organizations were integrated into the financial aid for overcoming the consequences of the pandemic (tax subsidies for April and a minimum wage subsidy for May 2020, when all operations were suspended to the protection measures and ban on gatherings).

A Rulebook on the Criteria for Funding and Co-funding of the Projects of Public Interest of Associations and Foundations" was adopted in February 2020. This Rulebook is part of the implementation of the Protocol of Cooperation between the Council of Ministers of BiH and Nongovernmental Organizations. The number of members of the Advisory Body of the Council of Ministers for Cooperation with NGOs increased from five to seven and this body held its first session in December 2020. However, it has not thus far been engaged in establishing better mechanisms for consultations in general or in the field of the response to the Covid-19 crisis. This body has limited activity due to the current political crisis concerning the competencies between the state and entity levels[28], but it still represents a good foundation for future efforts.

[28] Blockade of the system of making laws and strategies at the state level until 2020

Inclusive partnership

There are rare examples where local communities establish efficient partnerships with CSOs, but they do exist, and they can be used as examples of good practice. It is paradoxical that CSOs, despite being left out of the consultation process and with minimum support, were more responsive to the special needs of some special groups of the population during the Covid-10 pandemic, adjusting their work much faster and much more efficiently than the government institutions.

Among the consultative bodies where CSOs are represented is the Council of Children of BiH operating within the Ministry of Human Rights and Refugees of BiH. Two seats on this Council are occupied by members of the network of organizations that monitor children's rights in BiH "Stronger Voice for Children." On the occasion of November 20, International Day of Children Rights and Convention on Children Rights, this body focused on the pandemic's impact on the education of children in BiH discussing the matter with representatives of local and international organizations, representatives of children and announcing some new processes that through joint action may improve the situation for children in the newly developed situation.

The legal framework for CSOs' access to the resources and the Covid-19 support did not change during the crisis, and organizations had access to the resources if allocated through the usual channels, in symbolic amounts, and thematically intended. What happened in this period is the fact that the local and the RS government used to redirect all available resources to the measures for the protection of the health of the population, the needs of the healthcare sector, and realization of the recovery measures, reducing the size of the budgets intended for CSO activities. The grant schemes were prolonged, and the whole situation was affected by the local elections taking place in 2020 in BiH under difficult conditions.

In preparing the draft law on mitigating the Covid-19 adverse impacts on the economy in FBiH (Corona laws), several associations and political parties submitted their proposals for changes and amendments to the draft law to broaden the scope of the support measures to include CSOs, but the Government of FBiH disregarded their requests. The Government of Republika Srpska accepted to include CSOs in the measures of support, after meeting several times with representatives of the sector[29]. Some local communities also introduced subsidy measures or tax exemptions during the strictest measures restricting CSO activity.

In some rare cases, additional resources were provided to the constituencies of some CSOs, such as free tests for children and women in safe houses, disinfection of day centers, etc. A more significant action that stands out as an example is the action by the Government of RS in mid-2020. The RS Government allocated KM 260,000 for packages containing food and hygienic products to help vulnerable groups during the implementation of the measures, for members of all associations of persons with disabilities in the Republika Srpska[30]. Even though this represented significant support to the beneficiaries of these organizations, it did not contain the measures of financial support and sustainability for the organizations.

[29] 2020 CSO Sustainability Index for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Center for Civil Society Promotion

[30]<https://radiotrebinje.com/vijest/u-udruzenje-sunce-nam-je-zajednicko-stigla-pomoc-vlade-srpske?lang=lat>

Inclusive partnership

Most of these activities supporting the fight against the coronavirus were initiated and implemented by CSOs as the result of their many advocacy efforts, but they did not always yield satisfying results. With regards to the international support, it also changed. The focus shifted on health care and support to the medical and healthcare sector. This involved the activities that could be realized online or in conditions of reduced human contact, which put some organizations into a very difficult position. In BiH like in many other world countries, a fast and radical reaction to the spread of the coronavirus frequently led to the conflict between personal rights and public interest. Some of these cases and reactions involved the following:



Measures prohibiting movement were imposed on persons younger than 18 and older than 65 in FBiH in March 2020, and the Constitutional Court of BiH passed a decision that such measures constituted a violation of human rights, after which this decree was corrected allowing movement during some period of the day.



Some organizations with better advocacy capacities, such as Transparency International, Center for Investigative Journalism Sarajevo, Sarajevo Open Center, Center for Environment, and others detected and revealed many corruption activities (resignation of Milan Telgetija, the president of the High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council^[31] of BiH, corruption in FBiH and RS in the procurement of medical and protection equipment. The trials for these affairs are still ongoing.



The Decree on the prohibition of causing panic and unrest during the emergency passed by the RS President on April 6, 2020, which allowed for serious restriction of freedom of expression, was abolished on April 16, 2020, after intervention made by the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media (RFoM). The Decree was not implemented, and all measures were abolished after its annulment^[32]. Similar decrees were passed in the Brčko District and the Municipality of Stari Grad Sarajevo. Reactions came from journalist associations and Transparency International, and the Association BH Journalists also warned that the Government of FBiH began monitoring social media networks through the FBiH Ministry of Interior (cybercrime unit) bringing five cases of criminal charges for spreading false information and panic.



Press conferences were frequently censured in a way that journalists were able to ask questions before the conference, which meant filtration of the questions.



In the initial response to the pandemic, there were cases of serious violations of the right to privacy, release, and publishing of personal data of the individuals who were ordered isolation. The Decision of the Personal Data Protection Agency of BiH of March 24, 2020, prohibited the institutions to disclose the names of the persons who tested positive for Covid-19 and were in (the) mandatory isolation.^[33]

[31] High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council of BiH

[32] Response to the Covid-19 crisis. Human rights and Gender Analysis, OSCE Mission in BiH

[33] *ibid*

Inclusive partnership

Prohibiting a mother (parent) to accompany a hospitalized child in the Clinical University Center in Banja Luka provoked serious reactions in the public, as it represented a violation of the children's rights[34].

The Republika Srpska Ministry of Education and Culture asked for lists of the employees who signed a statement on income reduction in favor of the Solidarity Fund established by the RS Government as part of the measures for mitigation of the pandemic's consequences. After Transparency International reacted to this matter, the Personal Data Protection prohibited composing such lists and ordered their elimination [35].

At the beginning of the crisis, there was stigmatization and discrimination of persons with Covid-19 disease, which influenced an increase of hate speech, filled with stigma, prejudice, and discrimination against the infected persons, and migrants[36] that the public recognized as a potential source of the spread of the disease. The contact between migrants and the general public was restricted; the cantons with larger numbers of migrants limited their movement which led to their complete confinement in the accommodations intended for migrants without adequate living conditions.

Impact on religious rights, primarily because of the measures prohibiting gatherings and movement affecting religious ceremonies and services.

Closing down therapeutic institutions and introducing the Covid-19 regime in hospitals stopped medical and other treatments, while the access to necessary medicines unavailable in the country became a life-threatening problem affecting the right to life, survival, and health.

Without any ambition to count all of the many challenges in this area, it can be said that the difficult situation with the effects on human rights most often was not the result of the government's deliberate intention to limit human rights; it was rather due to the lack of awareness of human rights and the necessity to react to protect public health. However, had the composition of the HQs, committees and other decision-making bodies included more sensitized persons (CSO) able to predict some of the adverse effects and mitigate the effects on human rights, many of the situations could have been avoided. Consultations with human rights CSOs might have also helped reduce social harm. In reviewing this part, we must mention that there were positive effects too, the major one being the expansion of the right to health insurance in BiH. As BiH does not have universal basic health insurance for its citizens, free covid treatment was provided to all citizens in both entities of BiH and the Brčko District during the Covid-19 pandemic. The Association "Vaša Prava" also realized another important activity. It created an interactive application for free legal aid regarding the Covid-19 crisis.[37]

[34] <https://blmojgrad.com/roditelji-ne-odustaju-insistiraju-da-budu-sa-djecom-u-bolnici/>

[35] OSCE and others

[36] <https://globalanalitika.com/procvat-govora-mrznje-tokom-pandemije-Covid-19/>

[37] <https://www.mreza-mira.net/vijesti/ljudska-prava/aplikacija-za-pravnu-pomoc-Covid-19-stavljena-u-funkciju-vasa-prava-u-vasim-rukama/>

Inclusive partnership

Public information was one of the essential activities in the crisis, given that BiH as any other country in the world found itself in a situation for which nobody was prepared and that was utterly unpredictable. In the first months of the crisis, crisis communication took place between the crisis HQs and the media, via press conferences or publication of information about the situation, new measures, and conclusion, instructions for population, published in the official gazettes of the entities. These media were hardly accessible or not accessible at all to ordinary citizens, and frequently even to the journalists, which caused occasional confusion and unclarity regarding the measures prescribed. Communication was slow and difficult due to the restricted capacities of the public relations services, and many inquiries and requests for information remained unanswered. The main public information channel was television.

This brought difficulties to CSOs that lacked the information for the organization of their work. In preparing the measures for different sectors and different social activities, no reference was made to the activities of CSOs. CSOs overcame this problem by referring to the closest institutional sector – for example, CSOs working with children and youth organized their work according to the instructions for schools, or according to the instructions for public gatherings. The way the media communicated this information and the public appearance of members of the HQs frequently had a goal to intimidate people, to ensure compliance with the measures, which according to UNICEF and the UNDP [38] led to the fact that media reporting increased fear and left the strongest effects on women and persons living in poverty. An interesting piece of information is that personal perception of response to the pandemics was much more positive in Republika Srpska than in the Federation of BiH. In Republika Srpska, 64% of the respondents were satisfied with the response and 24% were fully satisfied with the response to the pandemic and the measures imposed. In the Federation of BiH, 45% of the respondents were dissatisfied with the governments' response, and 33% were fully dissatisfied. In terms of age groups, the most dissatisfied were respondents between 18 and 30 years of age, but there is also the information that 59% of the respondent, equally in both entities, believed that the Covid-19 measures, such as wearing face masks, keeping distance and ban on public gatherings had negative effects on their civic and other freedoms. The rate of those agreeing to this claim is higher among the population over 65 years of age (37%), which is expectable given that this population was exposed to the strictest measures, as well as children.

During the first year of the crisis, many institutions and government agencies worked to establish better information by developing special web pages or subsections with information about the Covid-19 situation and updated dates. They also began relying more on social media to inform and communicate with the public. The Ombudsman for Human Rights (Ombudsman) issued a recommendation on April 13, 2020, advising that the crisis HQs at all levels should take necessary measures to ensure all decisions are published in all public media and on all institutional web pages. "During the crisis, many CSOs were using their channels of communication with their constituencies and the public, and they contributed to better information of citizens by raising the public awareness of the situation, prevention, and the applicable measures.

[38] The Social Impact Assessment of Covid-19 in BiH, UNICEF and UNDP

Good practices of CSOs

If individuals and informal groups of citizens are regarded as part of civil society, then it is possible to find far more examples of contribution to finding the best possible solutions for the society. The government was criticized for its slow and insufficient response in helping the economy, proposals for improving the packages of assistance through the so-called “Corona laws”, a preparation of changes to the laws introduced to a parliamentary procedure to help the citizens and the economy, assistance in the preparation of legal solutions to help pensioners, and contribution through an advocacy letter to the International Monetary Fund asking the institution not to approve a new credit arrangement for it would be spent on current budgetary spending rather than on direct assistance to the economy.

One of the positive examples is that the Government of the Federation of BiH acknowledged the amendment to the Corona laws that was prepared by a group of economists, allowing for all FBiH citizens to have health insurance coverage during and 60 days following the emergency, regardless of whether or not they had insurance on some other basis.

Advocacy

In 2020, the Association “United Women” from Banja Luka demonstrated an excellent resilience and dedication to providing support to an extremely vulnerable group of women and children suffering domestic violence making their services of support to the victims (Safe Houses, SOS phone line, and legal aid center) available continuously.

Their advocacy activities aimed at the RS Ministry of Family, Youth and Sport secured free testing for the beneficiaries of a Safe House. As a response to the beneficiaries’ economic hardship generated by the pandemic, these women distributed 336 of 200 KM-cash vouchers for food and hygienic products and 300 KM vouchers to women who lost their incomes during the pandemic to cover the costs of rent and utilities. The Agency for Gender Equality of BiH secured additional support for the Safe House and during five months provided food, hygienic products, and payment of utility bills.

In 2021, as a sum of lessons learned, the association prepared a document called “Guidelines of the Platform for Empowering Civil Society for Empowering Support to Women and Girls Victims of Violence During the Covid-19 pandemic.”

They intend to support government institutions at all levels and service providers in Bosnia and Herzegovina to improve the response to the needs of women and children, girls- victims of violence, as well as the effects of the isolation measures to prevent the spreading of the Covid-19 virus. The guidelines were prepared in cooperation between United Women and the network Women Against Violence Europe as part of the Civil Society Empowerment Platform[39].

[39] Foundation United Women Banja Luka, Annual Report for 2020

Good practices of CSOs



Response to basic needs of the participants in the crisis

An interesting example of cooperation between CSOs and the government in responding to urgent needs of the population is the association “New Generation” from Banja Luka, the Association of Psychologists of RS, and the Ministry of Education and Culture of RS. This association set up a “Blue Phone” (SOS line supporting children exposed to violence). The goal of this tool is to provide psychological support to all the population in BiH to protect mental health during the Covid-19 crisis. Combining the resource of this association, the professional association of psychologists in RS, and the ministry, the public was provided with easily accessible psychological support (11 psychotherapists) and it is a unique example of this type of action in BiH[40]. The campaign promoting this service was organized under the slogan “You Are Not Alone” and it covered the entire territory of BiH.

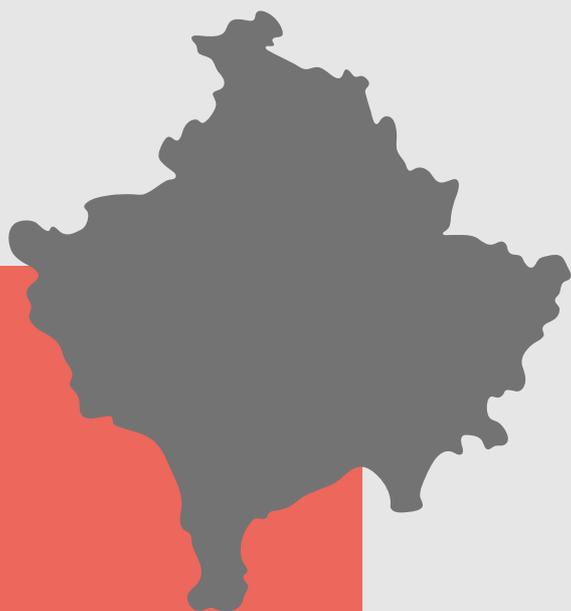


Community mobilization and other transformative actions

The local association “We Share the Sun” which brings together children with special needs and their parents in a day center in Trebinje, had to stop all its activities at one point because of the imposed protection measures. At the same time, they turned their workshop into a small operation for the production of the protective face masks, at a time when these masks were not available on the market. Working hard, night and day, they produced and distributed 1 000 face masks in the first week[41]. At the end of this review, it is worth mentioning that most of the studies, surveys and sources of information for this analysis came from civil society organizations, both local and international, that could prepare such reports during the crisis and provide the data and lessons learned that could not have been found in other places, including the government institutions. CSOs demonstrated their flexibility in adjusting their operations in crises situations, as well as skills in documenting good practices for the future needs, their generous willingness to share lessons learned – which we believe is significant not only for the third sector but for the society in general.

[40] <https://mondo.ba/Info/Drustvo/a1055562/Kampanja-Plavog-telefona-pod-nazivom-Niste-sami-namijenjena-djeci-ali-i-odraslima-VIDEO.html>

[41] <https://trebinjelive.info/2020/03/26/udruzenje-sunce-nam-je-zajednicko-sasilo-i-podijelilo-vise-od-1-000-maski-video/>

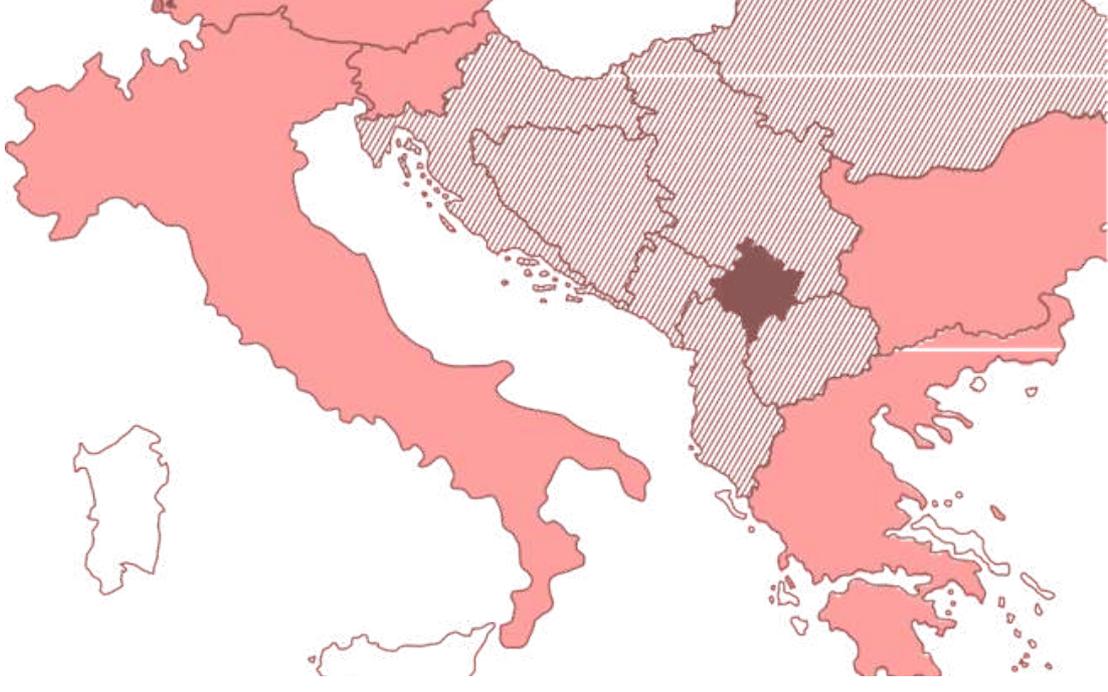


COUNTRY CASE STUDY
REPORT

KOSOVO

PREPARED BY
KOSOVAR CIVIL SOCIETY FOUNDATION

KOSOVO



General overview of the country

Kosovo is a parliamentary republic which declared independence on February 17, 2008. Kosovo's independence is partially recognized, more than 100 countries recognize its independence, including 23 out of 27 EU member states. Kosovo is a member of important international organizations such as the Central European Free-Trade Agreement, International Monetary Fund and World Bank and has signed its first contractual agreement with the EU in 2015, the Association and Stabilization Agreement which is the first legal step towards EU integration. However, it lacks membership in United Nations and most of its specialized agencies.

Kosovo occupies an area of 10.9 thousand square kilometres in southeast Europe with a population of about 1.8 million people. The ethnic composition of Kosovo is predominantly ethnic Albanian which comprises 93% of the population. The remaining 7% are Serbs, Bosniaks, Turks, Roma, Ashkali, Gorani and Croats, among others. Kosovo has the fastest growing population rate and the youngest population in Europe, with 53% of its population being under the age of 25.[1] Kosovo has a GDP of \$7.5 billion and its economic growth has fluctuated between 3% and 5% over the past decade. At the same time, Kosovo has the highest unemployment rate in Europe, around one-third of its population is unemployed, the vast majority of them are youth and women. More recently, Kosovo has been facing a serious large-scale brain drain problem.

Kosovo is a vibrant democracy and has made tremendous progress over the years. Kosovo has been improving its ranking in international indexes such as World Press Freedom Index, Doing Business Index, Corruption Perception Index, among others, where Kosovo stands better than most of the Western Balkan countries. More recently, in the "Democracy Report 2022" of Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem), Kosovo was ranked as the best democracy in the Western Balkans. [2] Kosovo even ranked better than two EU member states, Poland and Hungary.



[1] Lorenzo Sassi and Emanuele Amighetti, "Kosovo: A young country, being shaped by its youth," Politico, Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/interactive/in-pictures-kosovo-10th-anniversary-future-being-shaped-by-its-youth/>
[2] V-Dem Institute, "Democracy Report 2022: Autocratization Changing Nature," Available at: https://v-dem.net/media/publications/dr_2022.pdf

The socio-economic impact of Covid-19 in the country



Impacts on the people

Kosovo faced serious difficulties securing vaccines to launch the mass immunization process and was the only country in Europe that did not manage to secure a single Covid-19 vaccine until the end of March 2021, as it relied on donations and the COVAX sharing scheme. The first vaccines arrived on March 28, 2021, and by the end of May, Kosovo secured its first contract with Pfizer, buying 1.2 million vaccines. Between the period of January 2020 and February 2022, Kosovo has reported a total of 226,248 Covid-19 confirmed cases and 3,114 deaths.[3] Approximately 45% (or 815,796) of the population are fully vaccinated and citizens are now eligible for a third dose.

The Covid-19 pandemic hit the country hard. The country has been facing serious social and economic problems. According to a household public survey, 29% of families have witnessed an income decrease whereas 17% of the citizens lost their jobs.[4] Marginalized groups have been the most vulnerable ones.

The pandemic has mostly affected women and children especially in terms of health and welfare. The disruption of children's day-care and school have mostly affected working mothers, taking on more childcare responsibilities. Additionally, this has had a significant negative effect on women's employment, not only on incomes but also on gender equity and security in workplaces and homes. While also children were facing significant changes in their life from lockdown measures, school closures, disruption of regular routines, moreover, making a transition to online schooling has affected most children and their mental health.



Impacts on the economy

Economic activity in Kosovo fell significantly. Economic activities with the highest decline in turnover were the arts, entertainment and recreation industry (79%), real estate (44%), transport and storage (43%) and accommodation and food service (37%), whereas some industries such as information and communication increased by 12%, and water waste management by 23%.[5]

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a great impact on the functioning of Kosovo institutions. According to a report conducted by the European Network of National Human Rights Institutions, Kosovo faced serious concerns raised about the lack of proper functioning of the parliament and a limited accountability of the executive power.[6] Furthermore, there were serious limitations on access to information by public authorities which has had a direct impact on the work of civil society organizations and media.

[3] Covid-19 in Kosovo, Kosovo Agency of Statistics, Available at: https://datastudio.google.com/embed/u/0/reporting/2e546d77-8f7b-4c35-8502-38533aa0e9e8/page/MT0qB?fbclid=IwAR2JesiQR4H5KhgAta_CGmzLTOTfzYfLWTIPtK4i4Boyg_T4pCU-Sy39uzU

[4] file:///Users/visar/Downloads/Socio-Ekonomike%20ENG.pdf

[5] Economic Recovery Program, GAP Institute, Available at:

https://www.institutigap.org/documents/77281_Economic%20Recovery%20ProgramLack%20of%20a%20sectoral%20approach.pdf

[6] <https://ennhri.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/ENNHRI-State-of-the-Rule-of-Law-in-Europe-June-2020.pdf>



Government implemented intervention to address economic and social challenges from Covid-19

The government of Kosovo approved the Economic Recovery Program in August 2020, which intended to mitigate the economic losses and social consequences caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Among other measures, the Economic Recovery Program included credit coverage and supporting businesses affected by the pandemic and agriculture. One of the key Government's measures was to prevent the spread of virus by restricting the movement of citizens and business activity, thus disproportionately affecting different industries in Kosovo.[7]

After several failed attempts the Assembly of Kosovo approved the Draft Law on Economic Recovery on December 4, 2020, which envisaged 200 million euros support for businesses affected by the pandemic and coverage of three salaries for citizens who lost their jobs during the pandemic.[8] In addition, another measure aimed to ensure financial liquidity through the guarantee scheme of the Kosovo Credit Guarantee Fund (KCGF), where businesses affected by the crisis will have access to finance as well as enterprises of strategic importance for the economy of the Republic of Kosovo and increased liquidity for Medium and Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME).[9]

On June 2021, the Ministry of Finance, Labor and Transfers started the second phase of addressing the difficulties caused by the Covid-19 pandemic by approving the Economic Recovery Package. The total amount of the Economic Recovery Package was 420 million euros, which were allocated to the following groups:

Employment and formalization of the economy, with primary focus on strengthening the role of women and youth in the economy, by allocating 50 million euros for the creation of new jobs, directly supporting jobseekers, supporting return to work for all those who lost their jobs during the period March 2020 - April 2021, supporting every new employee, who has not been employed in the last 3 months, and who declares to TAK, subsidizing 50% of the wage for the first 3 months, up to a maximum of 150 euros per month for unemployed woman in the last 3 months, and who is employed, the guaranteed employment scheme subsidized by the state at the level of minimum wage for young people aged 18-24, supporting each employee with special skills with 50% of wage, up to a maximum of 150 euros per month for 6 months.

Improving the structure of GDP composition by favouring certain economic sectors, especially in the field of production and improving the country's trade balance;

[7] Economic Recovery Program, GAP Institute, Available at:

https://www.institutigap.org/documents/77281_Economic%20Recovery%20ProgramLack%20of%20a%20sectoral%20approach.pdf

[8] Economic Recovery Program, GAP Institute, Available at:

https://www.institutigap.org/documents/77281_Economic%20Recovery%20ProgramLack%20of%20a%20sectoral%20approach.pdf

[9] Law no. 07/L-016 on Economic Recovery - Covid-19, Available at: <https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDetail.aspx?ActID=35478>



Balanced and comprehensive economic growth, taking care that it is accompanied by allocating funds for vulnerable groups of the society, supporting by a monetary amount all the families that have lost their head of the family by Covid-19, supporting pensioners and families with social assistance ,social assistance scheme, with the aim of expanding it to include more families in need, food coupons for families in need, payments for jobless women after childbirth, support to family liquidity



Maintaining long-term sustainability and minimizing the country's fiscal risks, by controlling the growth of public debt in the country, and better coordination with the donor community to ensure maximum benefit to the economy and household.”[10]

When the government launched its assistance programs it included Civil Society Organizations (CSO) among the beneficiaries. Such an initiative is the Emergency Fiscal Package. Among other benefits the package included CSOs and journalists among beneficiaries. Prior to the introduction of the Fiscal Emergency Package, Government has extended the deadline for submitting of tax return forms and for submitting Annual reports by NGOs that have the Public Benefit Status.

CSOs in particular did not receive additional public funding designed exclusively for the civil society sector to cope with or adjust to the new situation created by the pandemic, even though that was initially promised.

[10] Economic Recovery Program, GAP Institute, Available at:
https://www.institutigap.org/documents/77281_Economic%20Recovery%20ProgramLack%20of%20a%20sectoral%20approach.pdf

Role and involvement of civil society in policy and decision-making in response to Covid-19 pandemic

Ownership

In terms of the existence of national strategies and government plans designed as a response to Covid-19, the Emergency Fiscal Package and the Law on Economic Recovery make the list. However, participation of civil society lagged behind during designing and implementation phases for both of them. When the government introduced its flagship Emergency Fiscal Package that was designed to mitigate the effects of the pandemic it was not clear if Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) were part of it. To that end, Kosovar Civil Society Foundation (KCSF) issued an official request to the Ministry of Finance to ask for the inclusion of the CSOs among the beneficiaries. The Ministry subsequently announced that CSOs were eligible beneficiaries. An exception were CSOs whose donor finances were not impacted by the government's measures related to the Covid-19 pandemic.

After several failed attempts, the government finally managed to pass the Law on Economic Recovery by the end of the year. Despite the list of planned government measures to mitigate the impact of Covid-19 on the economy (i.e. such as: amendments to the Law on Corporate Income Tax, the Law on Tax Administration and Procedures, and the Law on Value Added Tax), no specific beneficiaries were mentioned. Furthermore, the Law does not specify procedures for how the beneficiaries will benefit from these measures. KCSF provided its comments on the draft Law demanding that the public consultation phase be repeated, since there was no adherence to the legal deadlines and as a result the draft Law did not take into consideration the needs of the civil society sector or those of marginalized groups, such as women and minority groups. To this end, no specific cooperation mechanism between civil society organizations and the government has been created to design measures and policies to mitigate the Covid-19 crisis.

Last but not least, the Program of the Government for 2021 – 2025 published in May 2021 reflects the approach and principles that are going to be undertaken, as well as the initiatives that will be taken to improve the situation in managing the pandemic caused by Covid-19. The program intends to focus on the immunization of citizens based on the state plan for anti-Covid-19 vaccination, measurements update and regular implementation for preventing and controlling the pandemic in the country. In parallel to the monitoring and implementation of measures, Kosovo Government envisages increasing the capacities of National Institute of Public Health, on for testing and tracking capacities, developing and reviewing protocols for standardizing the treatment of inpatients, organizing of awareness campaigns for citizens to protect themselves from contracting the disease, continuously develop communication strategies for more effective information to citizens, sustainable funding of the healthcare sector. The program for 2021-2025 it also covers Economic recovery plan and Health sector reform for management of the Covid-19 pandemic.[11]

[11] Program of the government of the Republic of Kosovo 2021 – 2025, Available at: <https://kryeministri.rks-gov.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/11052021-OPM-Government-Programme-2021-2025.pdf>

Role and involvement of civil society in policy and decision-making in response to Covid-19 pandemic

Inclusive partnership

The right to access public information is a guaranteed constitutional right according to Article 41 of the Constitution of Kosovo. In 2019, the Law on Access to Public Documents entered into force. It introduced advanced forms and procedures for accessing public documents, and it requires each institution to publish a list of documents at its disposal. Each institution should update its archives and proactively publish all new documents. However, the current Law does not require the publishing of draft documents that are still in procedure. Procedures and mechanisms for accessing public documents/information remain clear, and there are monetary sanctions for civil servants and institutions who breach the legal requirements for access to publish information. Public institutions should answer requests for access to public information/documents within seven days. Denied requests should be accompanied by a detailed reasoning. Whereas, grounds for refusing access to public documents include protecting national security, private and personal information, commercial confidentiality, etc. The Information and Privacy Agency (IPA) has the executive power to issue fines for breaches of the requirements set by the Law. An interview conducted with representatives of the Agency revealed that no fines were issued in 2020 for unlawfully denying access to public documents.

In 2021, have been minor changes on the legal framework regarding CSOs' access to draft policies and laws. During the first part of 2020, a new Administrative Instruction, No. 03/2020 on the Transparency in Municipalities, came into force. A comparison with the previous Administrative Instruction indicates that the new one has abolished the article that specifically required municipalities to publish policy documents such as regulations, decisions and other secondary legislation. The newly introduced Administrative Instruction does however contain specific provisions on publishing draft proposals.

In practice, there has been a slight decrease in the number of CSOs requesting access to public documents compared to 2020. Twenty-five percent of CSOs surveyed asked for access to public information/documents, compared to 33% of organizations that did so last year. Out of those organizations who requested information/documents, only seven received them within the stipulated legal deadlines, while eight organizations^[12] received information after the prescribed time limit. Three CSOs did not receive an answer to their requests for access to public information/documents. Requests for access to public information were utilized for the purposes of this report. However, there have been no reported complaints from CSOs nor general public that requests to access information related to Covid-19 pandemic were denied or partially answered.

[12] Ademi, M (2021). Monitoring Matrix Kosovo country report 2020

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The entry into force of the Regulation no. 05/2016 on Minimum Standards for Public Consultation in January 2017, remains an important step towards CSOs and public inclusion in the decision-making processes. Until that date, public consultation did not follow a set of standards nor a systemic procedure, whereas now specific requirements and deadlines apply. The Regulation stipulates that participation of CSOs and general public is obligatory for central level institutions, except for the Assembly. The Government is obligated to conduct participatory decision-making processes starting from legislative agenda drafting.^[13] In December 2018, the Ministry of Local Governance Administration adopted the Administrative Instruction no.04/2018 on Minimum Standards on Public Consultation in Municipalities, following the long term advocacy from CSOs. This sub-legal act sets a positive development, nevertheless legal provisions lack many of the necessary steps for effective implementation, such as: lack of specific standards, deadlines or implementation mechanisms.

In practice the area of participatory decision-making was mostly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic.^[14] At the start of the pandemic, the public consultation process entirely stopped, only to resume later, mainly through written consultation processes. KCSF data show that only 56 out of 232 policy documents planned on the Legislative Agenda and Plan went through the written consultation process. Also, there is a slight increase of CSOs claiming they have not been engaged in policy-making processes. Government officials interviewed stated that the process has entirely stopped at the start of the pandemic only to resume later mainly through the online written consultation processes, a challenging process for both CSOs and the public institutions to adjust. As such, eighty percent of CSOs reported to have not been involved in the drafting process of policies/legislation during last year, neither via invitation from a public institution nor initiated participation on their own. Sixty – two of the interviewed organizations said they were never invited to participate in public consultations. Only 8% of surveyed CSOs said they are regularly invited to participate in public consultations, while 29% said they are invited from time to time or once in a while. Out of those invited to participate in decision-making processes, 18 organizations said they received invitations in the early phases of the consultation process. Only 14 CSOs said they had been provided with sufficient information on the content of the draft policies. Nine per cent of CSOs said they were given enough time (15-20 days as stipulated by law) to comment. ^[15]

The legal framework on social service provision is still in the amending process. In 2020, the drafting of the new law has continued, whereas its objectives include improving the quality and increasing transparency of social services, and building a sustainable financial system. To this end, CSOs and activists issued a joint statement demanding that the Government takes into consideration their input given during the drafting process of the law. The statement reads that the inclusion of civil society input is urgent given the dire situation of social services in Kosovo, which was further aggravated during the Covid-19 pandemic.

CSOs in Kosovo did not receive additional public funding designed exclusively for the civil society sector to cope with or adjust to the new situation created by the pandemic, even though it was promised. The survey shows a decrease in the number of CSOs that have received public funding in 2020.

[13] Ademi, M (2021). Monitoring Matrix Kosovo country report 2020

[14] Ademi, M (2021). Monitoring Matrix Kosovo country report 2020

[15] Ademi, M (2021). Monitoring Matrix Kosovo country report 2020

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Only 23 organizations were allocated public funds in comparison to 37 CSOs in 2019. However, similar to the previous year, survey data show that foreign funding prevails notably over other income sources of CSOs, showing a noticeable increase during pandemics. More specifically, in 2020, 35.5% of CSOs report to have received financial support from foreign donors, around 14% from public institutions at national level, as well as public institutions at local level (13.7%).

While funding from foreign donors for CSOs were paused or postponed from donors while there was no termination of CSO contracts from donors due to Covid-19. In general, foreign donors were flexible with adjustment of project activities in order to provide additional support for CSO response to Covid-19. [16] Most donors were also flexible on reporting deadlines for CSOs, including provision of no cost extensions, although few donors without affirmative actions on reporting deadlines.[17] On the other hand, regarding access to resources of the CSOs providing social services, the year 2020 marked the first time that the State's budget included a specific budget line for financing shelters, amounting to 900,000 EUR. However, it is not clear if these funds were collected, since this matter is prone to amendments in legislation.[18]

In addition, the Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare has been in close communication with all shelters all around Kosovo, to determine their needs. The interview with representatives of Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare revealed that during the pandemics all the shelters of the domestic violence victims remained open and operated in full capacity. Moreover, the allocated budget to CSOs service providers was not reduced neither the situation with the Covid-19 caused any reductions in the allocated budget. Additionally, CSOs have not been asked to alter their activities due to the situation caused by the Covid-19. In 2020, the budget allocation for 10 shelters, which operate as registered CSOs, was €495,000. Additionally, €275,000 was distributed to 29 CSOs through contracts for social service provision. None of the surveyed organizations[19] said that they had been prohibited from applying for public service provision without specific explanations being provided. The majority (60%) of CSOs that received funds from state contracts say that they are not sufficient to cover the basic costs of the service. This is an ongoing problem related to improper planning by public institutions when it comes to financing social services. The budget is usually allocated based on the overall costs of delivering a service rather than per the number of people being served. Two CSOs that have received funds from state contracts claimed to have received them on time, while two others reported encountering delays and problems when delivering services.

In terms of databases on donor's commitments and transfers, in Kosovo exists the Csdonorskosovo.com, which is a EU funded initiative to develop a database of projects and civil society organizations (CSOs) supported by Donors and Partners. Even though that this database provides a very important step on increasing transparency as well as informing the public, yet it remains a lot to be done in terms of promoting this initiative to both the donor's community and CSO in Kosovo.

[16] Kosovar Civil Society Foundation (KCSF), April 2020, "How is Covid-19 affecting CSOs in Kosovo"

[17] Kosovar Civil Society Foundation (KCSF), April 2020, "How is Covid-19 affecting CSOs in Kosovo"

[18] Ademi, M (2021). Monitoring Matrix Kosovo country report 2020

[19] Organizational Survey with CSOs in Kosovo, conducted in January 2020

Inclusive partnership

The legal and regulatory framework on freedom of association has not changed and no new policy processes have been initiated on this issue.[20] No restrictions in terms of freedom of association imposed due to the Covid-19 pandemic were noted or reported. In 2020, no CSOs reported[21] difficulties in exercising freedom of association, either online or offline. Surveyed CSOs[22] registered during the last year reported that the decision to register their organization was neither arbitrary nor impacted by third parties.

Measures adopted by the government to prevent the spread of Covid-19 mostly affected freedom of assembly. They were tightened and loosened in line with the numbers of new infections causing a decrease in public gatherings compared to the previous year. According to data obtained by the Kosovo Police, CSOs and citizens protested around two times less compared to 2019.[23] In 2020, 164 public assemblies were held as compared to the previous year, when 532 public gatherings took place.[24] Only 28% of the surveyed CSO stated to have attended public gatherings. An even lower number of CSOs have organized public assemblies themselves. Seven percent of surveyed CSOs stated to have done so in 2020, in comparison to 24% of organizations in 2019.

There has been a positive trend of CSOs enjoying the freedom of expression this year. According to the survey findings, 95% of CSO respondents claimed to neither have been pressured when using critical speech nor when their critique target public institutions, whereas 96% of CSOs stated to have not been threatened due to their critical opinions. There have been no reported cases of CSOs being sanctioned or imprisoned because of critical reporting.[25] Even though that mostly the freedom of assembly has been impacted by the government's measures to combat the spread of Covid-19, there have been no intentions from the government of Kosovo to shrink the civic space or negatively impact freedom of expression.

[20] The freedom of association is guaranteed by Article 44 of the Constitution of Kosovo and Law No. 06/L-043 on Freedom of Association in NGOs. The Law 03/L-118 on Public Gatherings guarantees all Kosovar citizens the right to organize and participate in public gatherings.

[21] Organizational Survey with CSOs in Kosova, conducted in January 2021

[22] Organizational Survey with CSOs in Kosova, conducted in January 2021

[23] Kosovo Police, (2021). Request to Access Public Information. Prishtina.

[24] Kosovo Police, (2021). Request to Access Public Information. Prishtina.

[25] These findings were cross-checked with interviews and focus group discussions.

Good practices of CSOs

Since the beginning of the pandemic, civil society organizations in Kosovo have been very vocal especially on advocacy, asking for their inclusion as well as of their constituents on the government's help packages as well as responding the community and responding to their needs.

- KCSF advocacy proved successful in inclusion of CSOs in the Ministry of Finance Fiscal Emergency Package. Before the package came into force a group of CSOs issued a joint statement asking the government to come up with measures that would help the private sector alleviate damages in times of corona virus crisis.
- The Kosova Rehabilitation Centre for Torture Victims suggested to the Ministry of Justice to initiate the necessary legal changes to allow temporary release or legal amnesty for prisoners with minor offenses, as far as the pandemic continues.
- The coalition of NGOs for child protection has demanded to be included on the Ministry of Finance Fiscal Emergency Package several socially vulnerable groups such as children with disabilities and their families, housing for children without parental care and family housing in alternative housing families. Both these requests have been approved.
- Kosovo Women's Network has recommended a list of measures to the Kosovo's government as to address the Covid-19 pandemic from the gender perspective. These measures asked for a gender-based analysis in order to inform and orientate drafting of recovery measures and inclusion of women's perspective on drafting of Covid-19 related policies.
- The Association of Gastronomes of Kosovo has requested to be part of the economic package organizations from the Kosovo's Government, in order to assist them in their recovery.
- The Organization for the Protection of Students' Rights "Student Democracy" has asked the Government of the Republic of Kosovo to include students in the Emergency Package.
- The Coalition of NGOs for Child Protection in Kosovo, KOMF claimed that the pandemic has caused many children with special needs to remain without receiving social services; including social, health and rehabilitation services, as well as without the necessary psychological support.

The Law on Child Protection is expected to enter into force in July, therefore, KOMF urges the government and municipalities to urgently take all measures to implement the Law on Child Protection.

The Association of Patient's Rights in Kosovo through an open letter addressed the Prime Minister, Avdullah Hoti and the Minister of Health, Armend Zemaj, expressing concern over the decision to enter the new phase of lifting the measures to combat the spread of COVID-19 amid increase of new cases of infections and at a time when public hospitals have reached their capacity limits.

CSOs in Kosovo worked with the community by working with the community on increasing public awareness on the importance of respecting protective measures in order to combat the spread of the corona virus. As such visual campaigns, providing free masks to the citizens in the public squares have been utilized by several local organizations. Other activities that help combat the spread of coronavirus were organized such as: producing face protective masks, distributing hygienic and food packages to the vulnerable groups, raising awareness of the public on the importance of following the preventive measures taken by the Government, monitoring and informing the public regarding the level of respect of the worker's rights during the pandemic, financial assistance to small and medium enterprises.

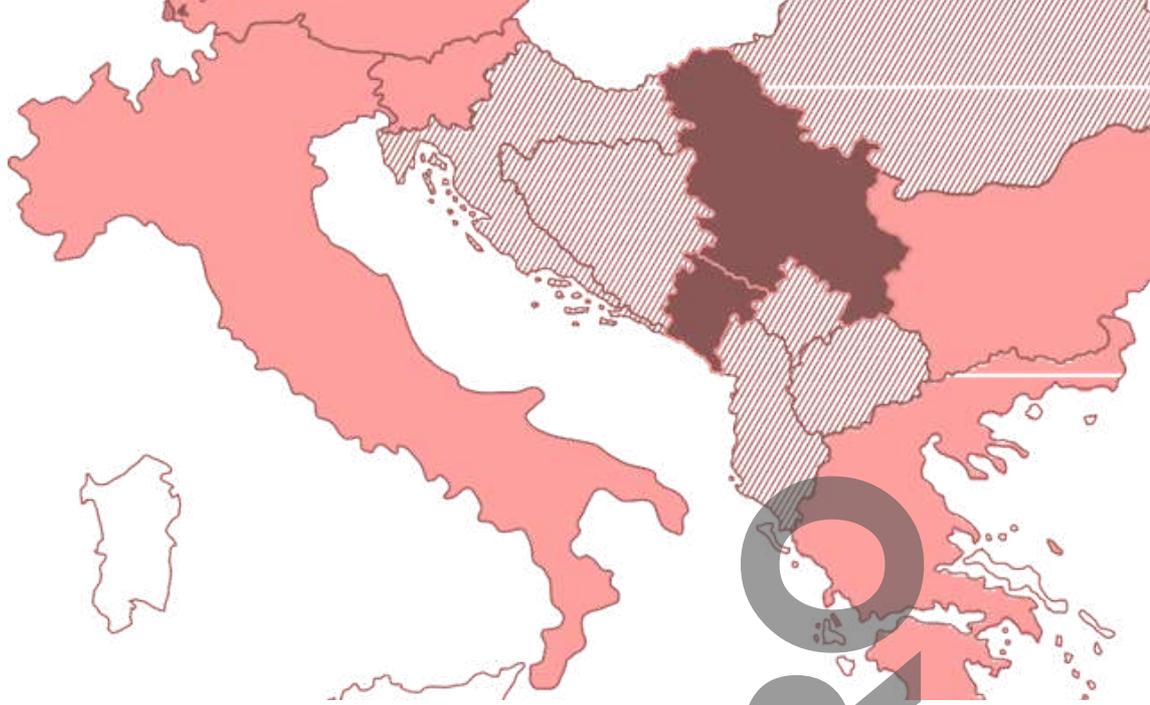
Additionally, citizens themselves have organized several initiatives such as: a group of volunteers that organizes their activities through social media to distribute food items to the vulnerable, a group of medical students that are volunteering in several medical institutions around the country.



COUNTRY CASE STUDY
REPORT

MONTENEGRO

PREPARED BY
CENTRE FOR DEVELOPMENT OF NON-
GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS



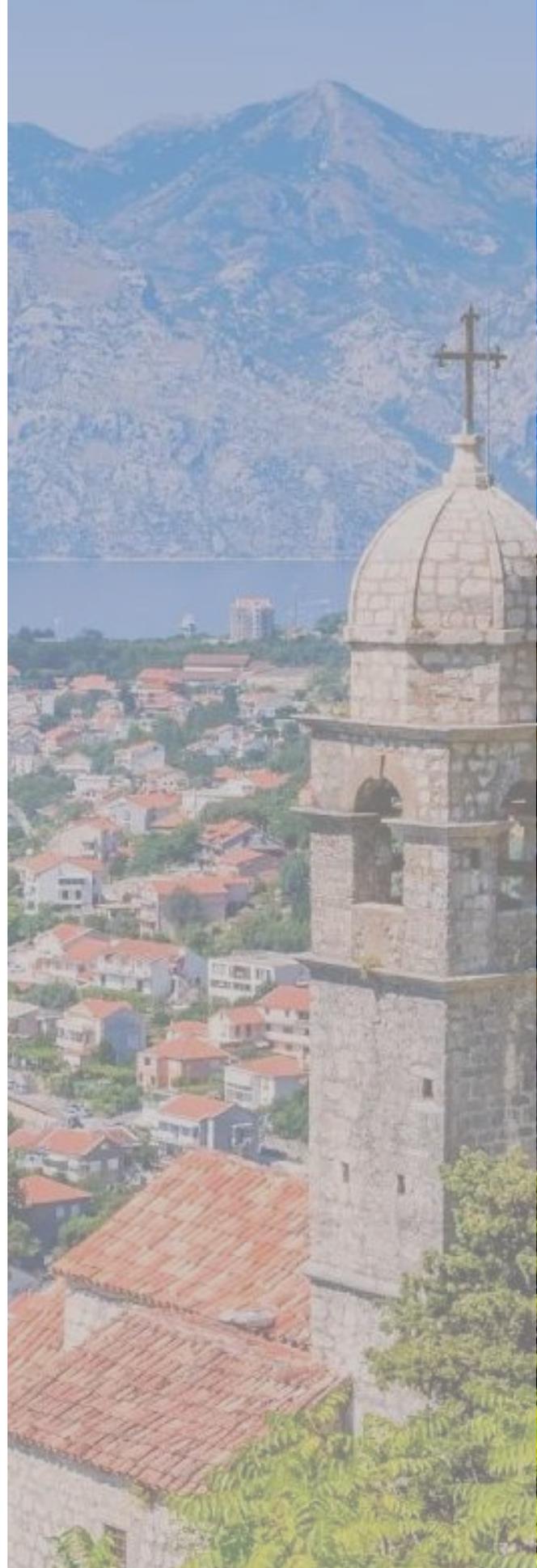
MONTENEGRO

General overview of the country

Montenegro is one of the newest countries in Europe. On June 3, 2006, the Montenegrin parliament declared independence from the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro, following a referendum that was held in May 2006 in favor of independence. The UN General Assembly voted on June 28, 2006 to admit Montenegro as a new member state. Since the 2006 declaration of independence, the European Union and all permanent members of the UN Security Council have recognized Montenegro. Until 2016, 182 countries have recognized Montenegro. Montenegro is the smallest state in the Western Balkans, with a size of 13,812 km² and a population of 622,303[1] with a multiethnic composition: the majority is represented by Montenegrin 45%, followed by Serbs 29%, then by Bosnians 9%, Albanians 5%, Muslim 3%, and Croats 1 %.[2]

The name Montenegro (Crna Gora) means "Black Mountain". It has a coast on the Adriatic Sea to the south and border with Italy and borders with Croatia to the west, Serbia and Kosovo to the north-east, Bosnia and Herzegovina to the north-west, and Albania to the south-east. Its capital and largest city is Podgorica, with almost one third of the total population of Montenegro. The official language is Montenegrin, but Serbian, Bosnian, Albanian and Croatian are also recognized in usage. Montenegro is an upper middle income economy, with a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of EUR 4,186 billion in 2020, according to data published by MONSTAT[3]. Montenegro ranked 48 in the 2020 Human Development Index[4] with Gross national income per capita 21 399 \$ and is on the official OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) list of Official Development Assistance recipients[5].

The unemployment rate in October 2021 reached more than 55 000 (24%), out of which more than 60% are women, according to the Employment Agency of Montenegro[6].



[1] Montenegro Statistical Agency MONSTAT <http://www.monstat.org/userfiles/file/demografija/procjene%20stanovnistva/2016/Release%202016.pdf>
[2] <https://www.monstat.org/userfiles/file/publikacije/CG%20U%20BRQJKAMA/Monstat%20%20CG%20u%20Brojkama%202015.pdf>
[3] https://www.monstat.org/uploads/files/Nacionalni%20racuni/BPD/2020/Godisnji%20BDP%202020_crn.pdf
[4] <http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/MNE>
[5] <https://www.oecd.org/dac/financing-sustainable-development/development-finance-standards/DAC-List-ODA-Recipients-for-reporting-2021-flows.pdf>
[6] <https://www.zzzcg.me/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/10-Oktobar-BILTEN-10.2021..pdf>

General overview of the country

Almost 25 % of unemployed are persons have a higher education. Below the poverty line 8.6% of Montenegrin people were living in 2013, also being the latest data on poverty published. More than 30% of the poor population lives in the northern region of Montenegro[7]. In addition, there is a significant disparity in incomes between the rural, ex-industrial northern regions of Montenegro and the more prosperous central and coastal regions. The current constitution of Montenegro, that replaced the constitution of 1992, was ratified and adopted by the parliament of Montenegro on 19 October 2007 and was officially proclaimed as the Constitution of Montenegro on 22 October 2007[8]. According to the first article of the Constitution, Montenegro is an independent, sovereign state with republican form of government, democratic and environmentally compliant state of the social justice ruled by the law[9].

The Parliament of Montenegro is the unicameral legislature of Montenegro with 81 deputies elected for four years. The prime minister is elected by the assembly, while the president is elected by direct vote for up to two five-year terms. Recent elections, held in 2020, were organized in a very tense political and social environment and resulted in a victory for the opposition parties and the fall from the power of the ruling DPS which had ruled the country since the introduction of the multi-party system in 1990. Despite persisting polarization of the political environment, transition of power was peaceful and this has demonstrated the democratic capacity of the Montenegrin society. The parliamentary elections were conducted under a substantially revised legal framework and were largely considered free and fair by international observers.

Montenegro is organized in central and local self-governments, and is moderately engaged with the reform of its public administration. Some progress has been made, notably, with the adoption of the public administration reform strategy 2016-2020, the public financial management reform programme, the entry into force of the new law on salaries and the simplification of administrative procedures. However, strong political will is needed to effectively address the de-politicisation of public service and right-sizing of the state administration.[10]

The rule of law sector is still lacking in independence and efficiency. The capacity of the Judicial and Prosecutorial Council has improved. However, the new legislative framework for increasing the independence, accountability and professionalism of the judiciary, as well as the code of ethics, have not yet been fully implemented.[11]

Corruption is considered to be widespread, but during the accession period Montenegro has achieved some level of preparation in the fight against corruption. Corruption remains prevalent in many areas and continues to be a serious problem. According to EU Montenegro 2021 Report, the process of institution building is largely complete. Despite some further steps taken, the track record both on successful investigations and convictions, in particular in high-level corruption cases, and on prevention of corruption remains limited, and all institutions should demonstrate a more proactive attitude to fulfilling their mandate.

[7]https://www.monstat.org/userfiles/file/analiza%20siromastva/2013/ANALIZA%20SIROMA%C5%A0TVA%20U%20CRNOJ%20GORI%20U%202013_godini.pdf

[8] The Constitution of Montenegro and the constitutional law for the implementation of the constitution of Montenegro, October, 2007, P.2, http://www.comparativeconstitutionsproject.org/files/Montenegro_2007.pdf

[9] <http://www.skupstina.me/images/documents/constitution-of-montenegro.pdf>

[10]https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/pdf/key_documents/2016/20161109_report_montenegro.pdf

[11]https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhoodenlargement/sites/near/files/pdf/key_documents/2016/20161109_report_montenegro.pdf

The socio-economic impact of Covid-19 in the country

According to the official information available from the Institute of Public Health, from the beginning of the epidemic events (March 2019) to the beginning of December 2021, the total number of registered cases of new coronavirus infection is 157,611, and the total number recovered is 152,876, while the total number of deaths in Montenegro since the beginning of the pandemic is 2,329. According to official information, 60.9% of the adult population was vaccinated with the first dose, and 57.2% were revaccinated, ie 278,394 persons or 44.9% received the first dose of the vaccine, and 261,405 or 42.2% of the total population received the second dose, while by the beginning of December, 56,878 people had received the third dose.



Impacts on the economy

Montenegro is characterized by a small and open economy, which is largely dependent on tourism, which has greatly affected on the overall impact of Covid-19 on the socio-economic situation. The impact of sharp drop of this segment of economic activities, which is a central driver of growth and presents more than 20% of GDP on overall Montenegrin economy, has been particularly hard. The severity of the crisis was visible almost immediately. In the period from the outbreak of the crisis to April 30, number of the unemployed increased from 35,429 to 40,361, based on the methodology of the Employment Bureau, with a larger number of women applying for assistance. The unemployment rate in December 2021 reached 24,73% compared to 20,48 percent in December 2020[12].



Government implemented intervention to address economic and social challenges from Covid-19

Facing the economic consequences of the Covid-19 crisis, the government has adopted measures to help mitigate economic and social impacts. These measures followed general recommendations of international financial organizations, such as the IMF, which, following epidemic control measures, contained recommendations for action to be taken by monetary authorities, governments and financial market regulators. During 2019, the government, through two aid packages, supported the economy through a series of financial, tax and other measures. The Government's economic team formed by Prime Minister Duško Marković has conceived two packages of measures to help the economy and citizens. In early March, the government passed the first set of economic measures aimed at making life easier for citizens and helping economy at the time of the coronavirus pandemic.

[12] <https://www.zzzcg.me/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Mjese%C4%8Dni-statisti%C4%8Dki-izvje%C5%A1taj-31.12.2021..pdf>



The first package of measures to help the economy and citizens, the value of which the Government estimated at 100 million euros, was adopted primarily as liquidity support contained the following measures:

- Deferment of repayment of loans to individuals and businesses with all banks, microcredit institutions and IRF for 90 days, all types of loans, including cash loans (secured and unsecured), housing loans, loans for pensioners, consumer loans, investment loans, working capital loans, liquidity loans, credit products related to use of cards, etc.
- Postponement of payment of taxes and contributions on salaries as well as obligations in accordance with the Law on Reprogramming for 90 days
- Creating a new IDF credit line intended to improve the liquidity of entrepreneurs, micro, small, medium and large enterprises operating in the fields of procurement of medicines, medical equipment and vehicles; tourism and hospitality; traffic; service; food production and processing.
- One-time financial aid to pensioners with the lowest pension and beneficiaries of material security
- Postponement of payment of lease of state-owned real estate for a period of 90 days



Second package of economic measures estimated at 75 million euros gross was adopted in order to preserve jobs and create preconditions for a faster economic recovery and one of the key measures included in this package is state aid for employees in sectors banned from work (hospitality, services, transport and tourism), who were provided with 100% of the gross minimum wage, as well as subsidies for vulnerable business categories (entrepreneurs, micro, small and medium enterprises up to 250 employees) in the amount of 50% of the gross amount of the minimum wage for each registered employee. This package of measures also included package of support to the agricultural sector.



The third package of economic measures was adopted in July 2020 and was defined as a "development package with a long-term view on the valorisation of domestic resources in the function of sustainable development"[13]. The projected total fiscal effects of the measures of the third package, for the period 2020-2024, were projected at EUR 1.22 billion, through direct payments to the economy from the state budget, through investments from the state budget and state companies, as well as through favourable credit arrangements with the IDF and commercial banks with the mediation of the state. This set of measures remained largely unrealized due to the change of government. After the election of new government, a new, fourth, set of measures have been adopted, noting that previous packages of measures were assessed by businesses and citizens as "to some extent useful, but insufficient"[14].

The goal of the implementation of the fourth package of measures was to help the sustainability of the economic sector, especially the most endangered economic activities, in the first quarter of 2021 and it was estimated around 163 million euros of the total direct and indirect financial impact.

[13] file:///C:/Users/User/Downloads/2020+07+23+-+Vlada+-+Treci+paket+ekonomskih+mjera+-+BROSURA.pdf

[14] file:///C:/Users/User/Downloads/Mjere+podr%C5%Ake+privredni+i+gra%C4%91anima+za+i+kvartal+2021.pdf, page 3

The socio-economic impact of Covid-19 in the country

The five main objectives of support measures are defined as follows:

- support for vulnerable categories of the population;
- support for maintaining employment levels and new employment;
- improving the liquidity of economic entities;
- creating conditions for increasing the number of tourists;
- stability of the market of agricultural products.



Impacts on the people

The consequences of restricting economic activities in order to combat the spread of the virus were significant, both economically and socially. The impact of the CORONA 19 pandemic on the socio-economic situation in Montenegro is best illustrated by the data that during the epidemic there was a reduction in wages among 21% of employees, and that 76% of the total number of employees working in the private sector, of which one third 40%, while almost 20% had no income at all. 14% of employees in the private sector were on unpaid leave[15].

The impact of the crisis is further reflected in falling sales and rising losses. Specifically, among companies that had lower sales compared to the same period in 2019, more than half have over 75% lower sales compared to the same period last year, while four out of 10 companies have a 100% reduction in sales. Losses over 75% are present mainly in service companies[16].

A pandemic and social distance can leave a mark on both the economic and the social, cultural and political aspects. The specificity of this crisis is that it is on both sides of the market, this is a crisis of both supply and demand. Both will be potentially slow to recover, because on the one hand, people will have less money and will be more cautious when it comes to investing, while supply will have a problem because many companies will not survive.

[15] <https://montenegro.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-07/Procjena%20uticaja%20COVID-19%20na%20poslovni%20sektor%20i%20perspektive%20rasta%20ekonomije%20Crne%20Gore.pdf>

[16] https://montenegro.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/RSIA2_Kljucni%20nalazi_0.pdf

Role and involvement of civil society in policy and decision-making in response to Covid-19 pandemic

Ownership

The National Coordination Body (NCB) was established by the Government of Montenegro in early February 2020, as the body responsible for coordinating and managing the pandemic response. In Montenegro, the first measures in the fight against the coronavirus were adopted in early March and referred to special measures for entering the country. The first case of Covid-19 in Montenegro was publicly confirmed on March 17, 2020. The National Coordination Body, which included representatives of all ministries as well as the representatives of the Institute of Public Health, the Police Administration, the Montenegrin Army, the Property Administration, the Inspection Administration, Local Self-Governments and many other institutions, were responsible for adopting all measures in the corona crisis. Within the NCB several teams have been formed: the Operational Team for Economic Measures; Operational Headquarters for coordination of measures to prevent the spread of coronavirus, implementation of activities related to the return of Montenegrin citizens from abroad, withdrawal and coordination of international aid, management of the donations, tourism and the Crisis Medical Headquarters. One of the first decision of NCB regarding the distribution of humanitarian aid is to distribute all humanitarian aid through the Red Cross of Montenegro.

The response of the Montenegrin authorities to Covid-19 was timely and comprehensive and mostly in line with measures adopted in EU countries. Even before the first publicly confirmed case of Covid-19, numerous activities have been suspended and schools were closed. At the beginning of June 2020, Montenegro was a country without active Covid-19 cases.

Although measures against the spread of CORONA virus were very strict and included the introduction of a ban on leaving the place of residence in the evening and on weekends, as well as a number of other restrictions such as the number of people who can gather in public (only two people) due to the small number of coronavirus cases, the general public largely supported and respected the measures at the beginning of Covid-19 crises. One of the main shortcomings in the management of the Covid-19 crisis, and in the adoption of measures was the complete absence of dialogue with all relevant stakeholders and civil society. The lack of dialog and inclusion of civil society organizations in NCB, as the body responsible for coordinating and managing the pandemic response, resulted in an inadequate response to the needs of vulnerable groups, but it has also led to the introduction of disproportionate measures in relation to the goal being achieved.

Role and involvement of civil society in policy and decision-making in response to Covid-19 pandemic

Inclusive partnership

Although Montenegrin legal framework insures consultation and participation of CSOs in all stages of development of policy, strategies, laws and all other decrees governing exercise of citizens' rights and freedoms, during the Covid-19 crisis NGOs were not given access to any of the decision-making bodies.

NGOs were not recognized as beneficiaries of any type of economic measures adopted to help mitigate economic impact of Covid-19. The government had no understanding for all the arguments offered by the non-governmental organizations in order to enable NGOs to exercise some of the rights granted to other economic entities and gave a negative answer to the request of the non-governmental organizations to provide their employees with average or minimum incomes as it has been done in other sectors.

Not only that there were no additional funds provided by the government for the work of non-governmental organizations for Covid-19 response, not even for CSOs that work with marginalized and at-risk groups, but also those funds provided by law for financing projects and programs of non-governmental organizations were not all allocated in 2021. The role that CSO traditionally play in both, supporting governmental efforts to mitigate the social, economic, and health-related harms, as well as holding the government accountable to ensure that policies and public services are inclusive and do no harm, has been called into question by this attitude of the government. The governments have taken significant steps to address the multiple consequences of the pandemic, especially in quickly passing measures to mitigate economic shocks, however, they also have missed opportunities to leverage the expertise and connections that CSOs could offer to pandemic-focused relief efforts, particularly in terms of addressing the social impact of the Covid-19.

Inclusive partnership

Throughout the pandemic Montenegro was one of the European countries with the highest level of the Covid-19 case per capita. Although during the pandemic no state of emergency has been declared in Montenegro, very restrictive measures have been introduced on several occasions. Strict limits were imposed on public life that included curfews, lockdowns of neighbourhoods and entire cities, closure of schools and businesses and bans of public gatherings. Also, some of the decisions implemented by the NCB have led to an increase in breaches of personal data protection. Although initially the citizens accepted strict measures, recognizing that the health system is poorly prepared for the crises, there were many questions raised by CSOs and public in general about the restrictions of movement of persons and related measures during the pandemic. Due to violations of measures prescribed by the National Coordination Body (NCB) to prevent the spread of coronavirus, by early May, Montenegrin police had filed criminal charges against 1,620 persons, up to 807 persons were imprisoned during this period^[17]. Also, in March 2020, at the beginning of the coronavirus epidemic, the Government of Montenegro, NCB, started publishing the names of persons to whom the Health and Sanitary Inspection issued decisions on mandatory self-isolation for 14 days. As it was stated at that time that the publication of the list was in the function of respecting epidemic measures and protecting public health. This act violated the constitutional rights to privacy and data protection, as well as the right to respect for private and family life guaranteed by the European Convention on Human Rights, but also grossly violated the right protected by the Personal Data Protection Act, which was confirmed by the Constitutional Court of Montenegro. In December 2021, the Protector of Property and Legal Interests of Montenegro was authorized for concluding a settlement with 2,720 persons in the amount of EUR 300 each in the name of compensation for violation of personal rights by publishing personal data.

There are no comprehensive, publicly available reports at national level about the implementations of measures. Individual, rather general reports are publicly available on the implementation of the adopted economic measures, but there is a lack of data that could be used to measure the effects and scope of the implementation of the adopted measures. Given that in September 2020, at the height of the pandemic, after 30 years, there was a change of government in Montenegro, it is very difficult to monitor the extent to which measures adopted in the period from March to September 2020 were implemented. New government was not operational until December 2020, and the budget for 2021 was not adopted until mid of June 2021, so the implementation of all public policies was delayed, including those related to the Covid-19 crisis.

[17] <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/ima-li-selektivnog-pristupa-za-prekr%C5%A1ioce-mjera-u-crnoj-gori/30599429.html>

Good practices of CSOs



The Covid-19 pandemic, unprecedented public health and social crisis highlighted all the problems that civil society organizations are face with in Montenegro.

CSOs and Non-governmental organizations as its organized form has taken a considerable hit across the board as the Covid-19 pandemic spread, bringing both impediments for work continuity, as well as social and financial challenges. By restricting of in-person activities, limiting funding opportunities, and creating a need for internet-based communications that far outstrips means of many organizations, the pandemic has left both CSO beneficiaries and staff members more vulnerable.

If we add to this the fact that NGO projects and programs were not financially supported from the government for almost the whole year, we can get a clear picture of the situation in which civil society organizations find themselves after two years of the Covid-19 pandemic. As the initial shock subsided, and faced with very modest funding opportunities, CSOs have focused their efforts on providing adequate response to the basic needs of their constituencies. CSOs have faced themselves profound impacts that harmed their capacities to continue playing their crucial roles in delivering services, advocating for rights and protecting the most fragile, while safeguarding participatory democracy and civic debate in the near future. Human Rights Action from Podgorica has published a report “Monitoring Freedom of Expression and the Right to Privacy during the Covid-19 Outbreak”, which analyses four cases involving deprivation of liberty and prosecution of individual for publishing rumors about coronavirus on social media, as well as a case involving the publication of names and addresses of over 2000 people who were subject to self-isolation due to their risk of Covid-19 infection.

The publication of personal data of over 2000 people has provoked a strong reaction in the civil sector in Montenegro, which in turn resulted in the removal of the data, and further on, a court decision in favour of the citizens who had their right to privacy violated by having their personal data made available publicly.

In light of the protective mask shortage in Montenegro during the Covid-19 outbreak, a number of initiatives aiming to provide the masks to the citizens were realized. One of such efforts was made by NGO Mare Mare from Herceg Novi, whose members created and donated homemade protective face masks to the orphans of the Bijela orphanage. Another notable initiative has been organized by ND Vijesti and supported by the Delegation of EU, by distributing reusable, locally made face masks with every daily newspaper in the country.

Throughout the pandemic, Fund for Active Citizenship (fAKT) has supported minor and local CSOs and informal groups of citizens in maintaining their activities and launching new projects. The supported projects were implemented in the area of youth activism, aiming to involve the youth in the decision - making processes, community development and promotion of youth leadership.

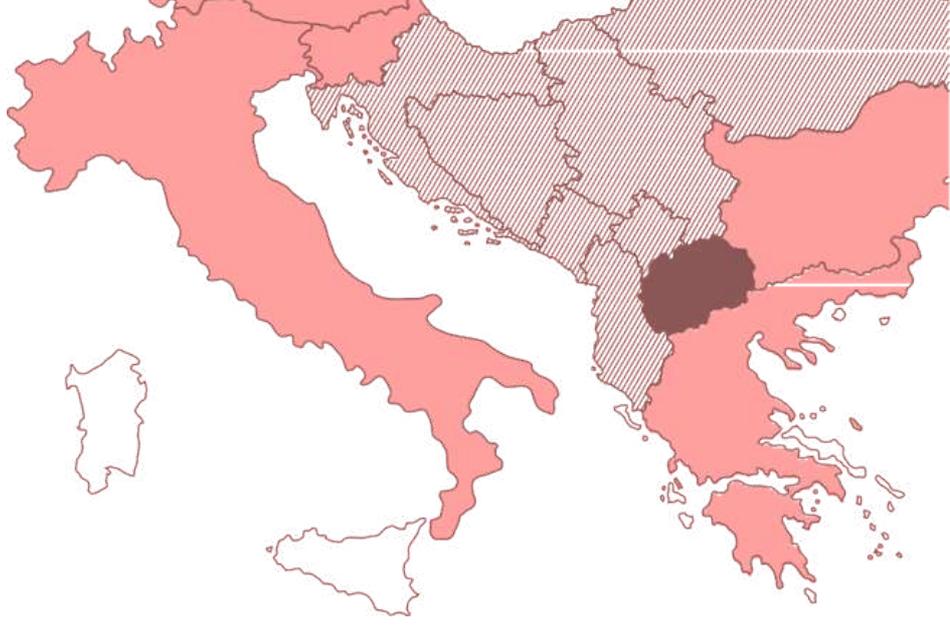


COUNTRY CASE STUDY
REPORT

NORTH MACEDONIA

PREPARED BY
MACEDONIAN CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL
COOPERATION

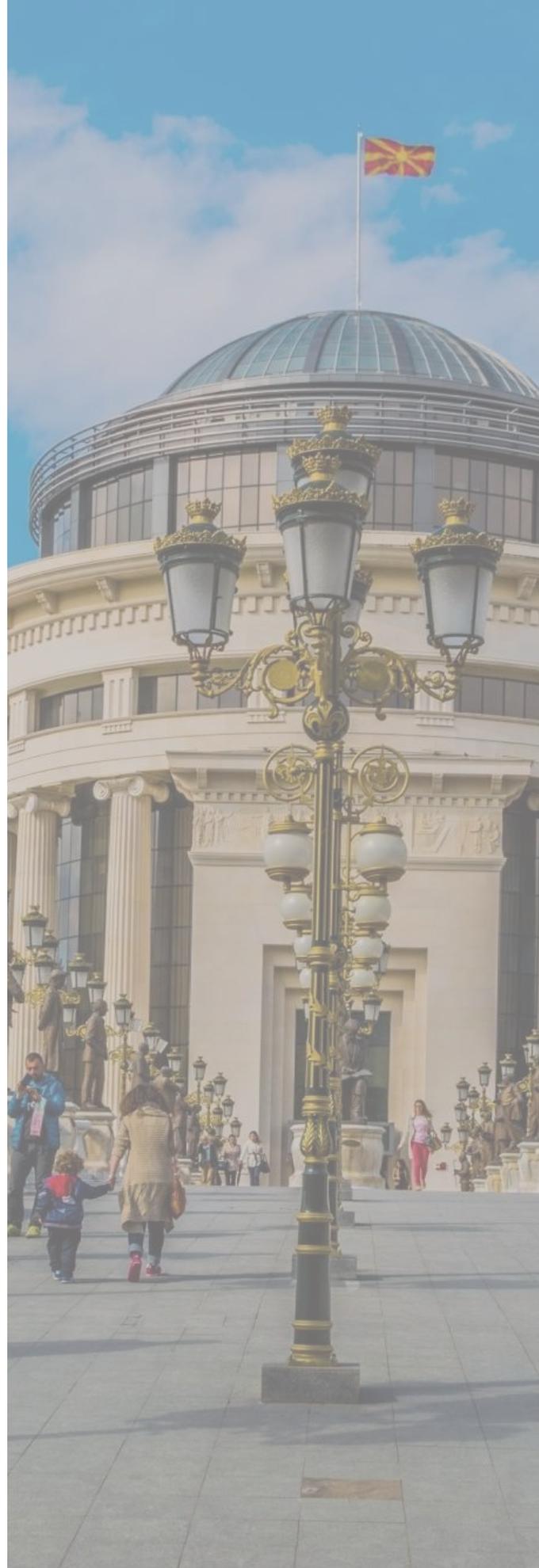
NORTH MACEDONIA



General overview of the country

According to the latest population estimate (as of 31.12.2020), in the Republic of North Macedonia, there are a total of 2,068,808 inhabitants, whereas the population density is 83.4 inhabitants per 1 km². The percentage share of men and women is equal: 50.0% are men and 50.0% are women. The average age of the population is 39.2. The average age of the passed away persons is 73.7.

In 2020, the active population in the Republic of North Macedonia is 950,858 people, of which 794,909 are employed and 155,949 are unemployed. The activity rate in this period is 56.4, the employment rate is 47.2, whereas the unemployment rate is 16.4. The average monthly paid net salary per employee in 2020 is 27,182 denars, and it increased by 7.8% compared to 2019.[1]



[1] State Statistical Office of the Republic of North Macedonia, <https://www.stat.gov.mk/>

The socio-economic impact of Covid-19 in the country

The Covid-19 pandemic emerged in Republic of North Macedonia in a relatively positive atmosphere. The unemployment rate and the poverty rate were steadily declining in the period 2010–2019, from 30.1% to 17.3% and from 27 to 21.9%, respectively. The country also had positive expectations for achieving solid economic growth. In the pre-crisis years, North Macedonia achieved positive, although not very high, economic growth rates (2.9% real annual GDP growth rates in the period of 2013–2019), with an increase in the value added, especially in the processing industry and trade. But the shock in March 2020 broke that trend. The health crisis has necessitated a swift response by the authorities in order to avoid its rapid spread. The measures necessary to protect the health of the population, which included restrictive movement, introducing several-day quarantine, temporary closure of many economic entities, gave a major blow to the economy and society as a whole. Thus, the crisis caused a decline in the economic activity, a decline in the private demand, investments and international trade, growth of unemployment and poverty and consequences for the psychological health of the population.[2]

At least 209,658 people got infected with Covid-19, and over 7,100 citizens failed to survive the disease. Most of the registered death cases are persons over the age of 60. 192,735 people were cured[3]. The vaccination process in North Macedonia started at the beginning of March 2021. As of November 21, a total of 822,751 citizens were vaccinated, 789,905 were revaccinated, and 63,137 citizens received a third dose. 57% of the citizens over the age of 40 have been revaccinated, and 33% of the population aged 18 to 39 have received at least one dose of the vaccine. The coverage of vaccination with one dose of vaccine is 58% of the adult population, whereas the coverage with two doses is 47% of the citizens over 18 years of age. According to the number of vaccines administered, 39% of the entire population in our country is vaccinated, and 38% of the population in the country has received two doses of vaccine.[4] Despite the significant percentage of vaccinations and the incidence of the disease, the majority of the population is still not vaccinated.

[2] Analysis of the Covid-19 effects on the workers who are part of informal economy and temporarily employed workers, through proposed measures for their support

[3] <https://koronavirus.gov.mk/>

[4] <https://koronavirus.gov.mk/>



Government implemented intervention to address economic and social challenges from Covid-19

Since the outbreak of the coronavirus, the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia has adopted 6 packages of anti-crisis measures, aimed at dealing with the negative consequences on the economy. Within these packages, about 113 different measures, which cover and support the legal entities and individuals affected by the pandemic, have been adopted.

All packages of anti-crisis measures for the support of the economy focus on the citizens, their jobs, social security, solidarity, creating an environment for easier overcoming of the economic consequences of the coronavirus and implementing a quick exit strategy once the crisis is over in order to continue with the positive trends of the new Macedonian development economy. Defining and creating the measures for all packages was done through a process in which chambers of commerce, trade unions and employers' organisations have participated.



The first package of measures was presented on March 18, 2020, as the first and urgent response of the Government to the new situation and it was aimed at mitigating the health crisis impact on the economy. The package consisted of intervention measures aimed at protecting liquidity and jobs, targeting citizens and companies most affected by the health crisis. A total of 12.2 million euros were allocated for this package, and an amount of 11 million euros was implemented. All implemented funds were directed to the enterprises, and there were included certain measures aimed at the citizens who did not request funds. As a result of the priorities of the first package, which was focused on urgent response to the crisis, the adopted measures were mainly from the group of measures that caused reduced budget revenues, as well as from the group of measures that have economic impact but no fiscal implications. The lost revenues for the measures from this group were planned at 5.5 million euros, and 5.49 million euros or almost 100% implementation rate.



The second package of economic measures was adopted on 31.03.2020 and it consisted of concrete measures that had a direct impact on the real economy and direct assistance to each family and individual separately. The purpose was to support the economy, keep jobs, maintain social stability and help the citizens affected by this crisis. Within this package, 332.9 million euros were allocated, and all planned funds have been disbursed.



The third package of economic measures, announced on 17.05.2020, was aimed at reviving the domestic economy through direct support of citizens and the economy. It contains short-term and medium-term measures for revitalization of the domestic economy. A total of 229.3 million euros have been allocated for the third package, of which 172.9 million or 75.4% [5], have been implemented as of February 2021, but the implementation was expected to increase in the upcoming period. A higher amount of the third package is intended for individuals, i.e. 122.4 million euros, whereas 106.9 million are intended for legal entities.

[5] <https://vlada.mk/node/24854>



The fourth package of measures was adopted on 27.09.2020 as a direct aid to the economic and social security of citizens, as well as to encourage private consumption as a stimulator of social growth. A total of 472.1 million euros have been allocated for the fourth package, of which 73% [6], or 343 million have been implemented, and a significant increase in the implementation is expected in the upcoming period.



The fifth package of economic measures, announced on 16.02.2021, is intended for the citizens and the companies, for a stable and developing economy and for improving the liquidity of the economy. The fifth package contains a total of 29 measures, in the amount of 9.7 billion denars or about 160 million euros.



The sixth package of anti-crisis economic measures was announced on April 20, 2021, in the amount of 17.8 million euros, intended to support activities that were completely closed in order to prevent the spread of coronavirus during April 2021, as well as to improve the liquidity of companies that invest during 2021. The sixth package of measures includes seven measures that target the most affected sectors by the coronavirus crisis, thereby supporting 10,000 companies, which employ about 60,000 citizens. [7]

All adopted measures can be divided into one of the following 3 groups:

- Measures that cause budget expenditures, i.e. direct fiscal implications,
- Measures that cause reduced budget revenues, and
- Measures that have an economic impact, and do not have fiscal implications

As for the implementation of the first four measures adopted by the Government to deal with the Covid crisis, there is a report and information on their status and implementation, which are publicly available. No such reports have been published for the fifth and sixth packages yet.

[6] <https://vlada.mk/node/24854>

[7] <https://vlada.mk/ekonomski-merki-covid19>



Impacts on the economy

The deteriorated international environment and restrictive measures taken by the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia to prevent the spread of coronavirus in the country, caused a 5.9% decline in the economic activity in the first nine months of 2020, having the largest decline of almost 15% in the second quarter. In the third quarter, the decline in the economic activity significantly slowed down, i.e. it amounted to 3.3%. The pandemic mostly affected the export sector, industrial production, as well as some of the activities in the service sector, such as trade, transport, hospitality and catering and entertainment and arts. With the help of government measures aimed at reducing the decline in the economic activity in 2020, it was estimated at 4.4%. [8]

In order to reduce the global environmental effects on the domestic economy, the Government, in 2021, continued to implement measures to support companies and vulnerable categories of citizens, but also to recover the economy and enable sustainable development by implementing the necessary structural reforms.

In the Republic of North Macedonia, a study was conducted on the effects caused by Covid-19 on the tourism and hospitality and catering sector with recommendations for dealing with the economic effects [9]. The study shows that by August–September 2020, the cancellation of arrangements was massive and there was a drastic decline in the number of tourists expected to come from abroad. In almost 100% of the hotels, in 2020 the reservations for April, May, June were canceled, in July there were cancellations of group reservations in 89% of the hotels, in August in 69% of the hotels, in September the cancellations are in 50% of the respondents, and there were cancellations for December as well as January 2021. In order to improve the situation in the tourism sector, the study states that it is necessary to stimulate domestic tourism by introducing special subsidized arrangements and conducting a strong campaign to encourage domestic tourism. The crisis caused by Covid-19 also affected the craftsmen, and the real situation reflects the situation on the ground.

In 2019, agriculture participated by 9.4% in the total value added and employed 13.9% of the total number of employees. During the pandemic – in the second and third quarter of 2020, agriculture continued to grow at an average rate of 4.6% compared to the same period in 2019. But in the same comparative dimension, the agriculture lost almost 21 thousand workers, whereas the overall economy lost only 8 thousand. As a result, hours worked declined by 28% and the wage income declined by 16%. Hence, agricultural workers were the ones who were impacted the most by the Covid-19 crisis, but not protected with government measures. [10]

While most sectors in the economy are suffering losses and struggling to survive due to the crisis caused by Covid-19, there has been an increase in the electronic commerce (e-commerce) in North Macedonia. The coronavirus pandemic has changed the habits of domestic buyers, who have shifted much of their online shopping to domestic e-shops instead of foreign ones. This is certainly due to the closure of borders and the complexity that has arisen with the delay in delivery of products purchased from abroad, as well as the fear of ordering products originating primarily from countries that were infected with Covid-19. According to the analyses, 59.4% of the value of online transactions realized by payment cards issued in the country remained in the country, whereas 40.6% of the transactions were realized to online traders abroad [11].

[8] Economic Reform Program 2021–2023, Ministry of Finance of RNM

[9] Follow-up study of the effects on the tourism and hospitality and catering sector by the health-economic crisis caused by Covid-19 pandemic, with recommendations for dealing with the economic consequences

[10] Agriculture workers – silent victim of the pandemic?

[11] Analysis of the e-commerce progress in the period of 2017–2019 with a special overview of the Covid-19 impact on the e-commerce development in 2020



Impacts on the people

The health and economic crisis caused by Covid-19 has affected North Macedonia after years of steady improvement in the labor market. It brought to light the structural disparities and weaknesses of the labor market by affecting certain groups of workers more severely than others. In general, low-paid workers, workers in the informal economy, paid domestic workers, and unpaid family workers were among the most affected in terms of losing jobs and income. The total of job losses during the pandemic of about 7.5 thousand jobs per year mainly referred to low-paid workers, most of whom were paid domestic workers and informal workers.

The noticeable disappearance of many informal jobs and unpaid family jobs can be attributed to the pandemic, but it must not be directly understood as job losses. Namely, in order to mitigate the negative consequences of the pandemic, the Government of North Macedonia adopted several packages of measures. The main measure aimed at preserving jobs, “14,500 denars per worker” saved more than 60 thousand jobs, although they were all from the formal economy.[12] The rise in registered official reports of violence against women and domestic violence during the pandemic has been confirmed by the warnings of the civil society organisations, institutions and international organisations. The measure for uninterrupted reporting of violence during curfew as well as the information campaigns on social networks by the institutions are a minimum of measures taken, corresponding to the initial period of the crisis. During the pandemic, women faced psychological and combined violence, as well as physical and economic violence. The seriousness of the problem is shown by the figures of the Ministry of Interior (MoI) according to which the number of crimes committed in connection with domestic violence in 2019 was 989. Only in the first quarter of 2020, according to data from the MoI, the number of reports of domestic violence was 1270 of which 241 crimes, 109 misdemeanors and 920 complaints. According to the surveys,[13] out of a total of 12 women who experienced violence during the pandemic, 17% did not succeed in getting the protection they needed, whereas 83% of them received protection and solved the problem. 70% of women who experienced violence during the pandemic, even though they solved their problem, still think that the state does not take appropriate measures or they cannot evaluate the treatment. They need to be provided with greater care and protection, education and encouragement to report violence, financial assistance and employment, greater engagement with social services, and so on.

Although the findings indicate that there are no significant gender differences in terms of workload and job losses for women and men as a result of Covid-19, job losses still vary among age groups and they are highest among women aged 45–54 years and younger men aged 18–34 years. The findings show that a crisis measure adopted by the Government, allowing one of the working parents to stay home to take care of a child/children under the age of 10 was used exclusively by employed women living in urban areas, married/extramarital cohabitants or single mothers, by highest expected utilization in the age group 18–44 years.

The findings show that more women compared to men changed their location of work and continued working from home. The findings also show that both women and men experienced an increase in the number of hours spent doing unpaid household chores (cleaning, housekeeping, grocery shopping, household management and cooking and serving meals) and caring for children and other persons. However, women have been more likely than men to face disproportionately large amounts of unpaid housework and care since the beginning of the pandemic, devoting much more time to household chores, caring for and educating children, and caring for other family members. Most of the women compared to men feel increased stress and anxiety as a result of the pandemic, i.e. they have a greater negative impact on mental health. Also, the closure of schools is more often emphasized by women as a greater significant impact on their lives, compared to the experiences of men, which again reflects the pre-crisis situation in households where women are primarily responsible for the care and support in educating children.[14]

[12] Covid effect on insecure workers in North Macedonia

[13] Impact of the crisis caused by Covid-19 on Roma women and men in the Republic of North Macedonia

[14] Covid-19 impact on men and women in the Republic of North Macedonia

The pandemics and the undertaken measures to protect from the spread of the disease have a major impact on young people. Pupils and students were the first to change their way of life by the closure of educational institutions, in the improvised online classrooms which, despite their best intentions, is unclear how effective they are. There are young people without access to the Internet and technology whose parents cannot help them with learning, and who are at risk of lagging even more behind their peers. Open issues such as graduation exam, faculty enrollment or the beginning of the new year create great uncertainty, especially among young people who need to move from one level of education to another. Layoffs and job losses particularly affect young people, a group that finds it difficult to find work and for which there are not enough places in the labor market, a situation that is yet to become worse. For many young people who lose their jobs due to the crisis, there will be no accurate data, because they are often part of the shadow economy, so the measures provided for labor market protection do not apply to them. Despite government support, young people who will lose their jobs or fall even lower on the employment ladder due to market losses might be expected to have demotivation and impaired mental health and desire to emigrate and the demand for a better life abroad will increase, filling the gaps in foreign labor markets. Social implications, such as prolonged isolation, being cut off from peers and confinement in their families, have an effect on the mental health and psychological well-being of young people.

The effects of forced cut-off increase the intensity of personal and systemic problems that have been controlled or ignored in the everyday context. Many young people are cut off from their daily lives and tied to their families, and they are affected by the pressure of the risk they present as carriers, and many young people will suffer real losses. Fear, anxiety and stress arising from this condition lead to anxiety, depression and a number of other phenomena, and the risky use of psychotropic substances can also increase.[15]

Although government measures to combat Covid-19 and the consequences were rarely directly targeted at children in terms of finances, a number of measures were implemented by the government as well as other important stakeholders, which supported the wellbeing of children during the pandemic. The biggest government move to meet the needs of children was to adapt the entire education system, since the beginning of the pandemic, to operate in a new distance learning regime. Various campaigns aimed to raise awareness and guide parents and children through the steps they can take if they find themselves in a delicate situation, such as cases of violence against children or a case where psychological support is needed. Last but not least, government measures to preserve jobs and provide financial assistance to the unemployed persons generally covered more households with children, limiting the pandemic pressure on child poverty. However, despite the fact that the pandemic is currently subsiding, there is still a need for additional policy measures to further mitigate the consequences of the pandemic that may persist in the future.[16]

[15] Urgent recommendations to reduce the negative effects of Covid-19 on youth

[16] Social and economic effects of Covid-19 on children in North Macedonia

The adopted measures ignored the needs specific to persons with disabilities, especially those living in rural areas. Taking into account that there is a serious lack of statistics on persons with disabilities in the country and that the register for their records has not yet been established at the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, we do not have adequate information on the types of disabilities of this group of citizens, which contributes to the development of measures tailor-made to their needs. For most persons with disabilities, prevention and protection measures against the virus caused difficulties in their everyday functioning. The difficulties refer to the limited socialization and the limited movement, as well as to the difficulties related to the observance of the protection measures (maintaining a physical distance, wearing a mask, avoiding grouping, etc.). Persons with disabilities and their caregivers have faced difficulties in exercising their rights during the pandemic, of which only a small number sought help mostly in social work centers, and even a smaller number sought help from civil society organisations.

Only a small number of the persons have received the requested assistance, i.e. they have exercised the requested rights. Children with disabilities faced serious problems in attending online classes, which was largely inappropriate and unadapted to them and the different types of disability. The health institutions were put in full function of overcoming the consequences of the pandemic, and all other ongoing examinations and interventions were postponed. Rehabilitation services, which are of particular importance to persons with disabilities and have a positive impact on their development, were unavailable to many persons with disabilities. Even the Covid-19 testing points are not accessible to persons with disabilities. In addition, taking into account the fact that some persons with disabilities have difficulty adhering to anti-virus measures, such as wearing a mask, the risk of infection can be significantly increased both for them and others.

One of the most common problems faced by persons with disabilities in terms of access to social protection services arises from the inability to use the services of day care centers. Although, in the meantime, the day care centers have started operating, both their operating capacity and the organized transportation to the centers is still limited. During the pandemic, the difficulties in collecting and renewing documents for exercising social protection rights were significantly expressed, and in some cases this led to the loss of the right to use them. The narrowly defined framework for social protection has contributed for the large number of persons with disabilities who do not meet the requirements for financial support, and due to the crisis remained without or reduced income or lost their jobs, to face increased social risk and poverty. The pandemic inevitably affected the financial situation of persons with disabilities, thereby significantly increasing the costs related to health protection, including the costs of hygiene items and medicines. Only a small number of institutions are fully accessible to persons with disabilities, and it also includes their information accessibility.[17]

[17] The impact of the Covid-19 crisis on the persons with disabilities in North Macedonia

Role and involvement of civil society in policy and decision-making in response to Covid-19 pandemic

The Covid-19 crisis has significant effects on CSOs' participation in decision-making. According to several researches, state authorities have not found an appropriate way to fully include organisations in the process of repairing the damage caused by the crisis. This trend might have effects on the confidence of the civil society in their participation in the long run.

Ownership

In the absence of an existing formal structure that would coordinate the work of state institutions during the state of emergency, at the 19th session held on March 14, 2020, the Government established the General Coordination Crisis Staff (GCCS). This staff assumes the competence for full coordination of the state administration bodies, the legal entities established by the state, the local self-government units regarding the prevention of the transmission and spread of Covid-19. The General Coordination Crisis Staff was headed by the Prime Minister of North Macedonia in order to ensure coordination of the whole process.

During the state of emergency, the GCCS met on a daily basis, following the meeting of the Infectious Diseases Commission. At those meetings, GCCS mainly discussed the situation in the previous 24 hours, reviewed the recommendations of the Infectious Diseases Commission and the proposals and requests received from legal entities. Based on the received proposals, the Government adopted the decisions and decrees with a force of law^[18] at a Government session which was held during the same day. The Infectious Diseases Commission has very important role during the Covid-19 pandemic. The Commission is an advisory body established by the Minister of Health, which gives proposals and recommendations to the Minister. The Commission's recommendations were crucial in defining measures to deal with the pandemic by the Government - both during the state of emergency and after the formation of the new Government.

Following the parliamentary elections, the new government formally established a new GCCS at its first session held on September 1, 2020, with a similar composition and leadership roles to ensure continuity in dealing with the crisis. However, the GCCS meets once a week. Taking into account that there was no change in the position of Minister of Health, no changes were made in the approach of the Ministry of Health and the work of the Infectious Diseases Commission. Due to the fact that the Government no longer has legislative competence, the legal changes that are necessary for certain recommendations or measures require a regular legislative procedure to be conducted in the Assembly.

[18] <https://vlada.mk/uredbi-covid19>

Ownership

Other government coordination bodies established in accordance with the Law on Crisis Management are: Steering Committee for Coordination and Management of the Crisis Management System and Assessment Group. By adopting the Decision on the existence of a crisis situation on the territory of the Republic North Macedonia on 20.11.2020 the General Crisis Management Staff was also activated, as the operational expert body of the Crisis Management Center that manages crisis prevention and management activities.

In the Regional Crisis Management Centers, regional staffs are established, as operational professional bodies managed by a person appointed by the director of the Center. The regional centers are composed of representatives of the relevant ministries and other state administration bodies, as well as one representative of each of the municipalities and the City of Skopje. In August 2020, in the Republic of North Macedonia, Epidemics and Public Health Emergency Operations Center was opened. The Center provides centralized real-time information, situation monitoring, reporting, as well as advice on how to act in public health-related events and emergencies. The risk or threat of a pandemic is not mentioned in the strategic documents at the national level. Thereby, a number of strategic documents at national or institutional level mention the risk of an epidemic. However, there is no complete, comprehensive and current national strategy, which would cover the risk of pandemic and epidemic in the given list of security risks. Such a strategy would serve as a basis for developing a multisectoral approach to dealing with such risk. At the strategic level, through a participatory and transparent process, a national security strategy should be adopted, in accordance with the latest amendments to the Law on Defense as of February 2020. Extending the notion of security, the new strategy should be based on risk assessment and supported by an action plan to build resilience to various security threats. In that context, the Assembly should take an active role, not only in terms of the adoption of this document, but also in overseeing its implementation.[19]

The pandemic situation was covered in the annual/action plans, programs and projects of several institutions, some of which are the following:

- Dealing with the global pandemic caused by the coronavirus Covid-19 is the second strategic priority of the Government, and the Work Program of the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia - 2021 as one of the areas states "Covid-19 is not just a health challenge."
- "Action 21 - for European standards at home" are key projects and programs for implementation of the Government in 2021, in order to implement European standards in society, where the fourth priority is "Mask, distance and vaccine against Covid-19".
- In May 2020, the Government adopted the Plan to reduce restrictive measures in order to prevent the spread of coronavirus, which results in 80 protocols for conduct during Covid-19. [20]
- In the 2021 Annual Work Plan [21] of the Crisis Management Center (CMC), Dealing with the global pandemic caused by the Covid-19 coronavirus is part of the first program in their work plan. The annual plan does not contain detailed information related to the priority goals of this program. In November 2020, the CMC General Crisis Management Staff adopted the Action Plan for Prevention and Management of the Spread of Covid-19, which is not publicly available.
- Taking into account that the Covid-19 crisis brings uncertainty and great risks, with a purpose of making the economy more resilient, the Government prepared the "Economic Reform Program 2021-2023" [22] in which it defined the medium-term fiscal policy based on three platforms: A. Smart growth 2021-2025 for recovery and sustainable development of the economy, B. Fiscal Consolidation 2021-2025 and C. Public Investment Plan 2021-2025.

[19] Crisis management as a response to Covid-19 pandemic in the Republic of North Macedonia

[20] <https://vlada.mk/protokoli-koronavirus>

[21] 2021 Annual Work Plan of the година of the Crisis Management Center

[22] Economic Reform Program 2021-2023, Ministry of Finance of RNM

The Deputy Prime Ministers, ministers, directors of relevant state institutions and representatives of the Cabinet of the President are members of the General Coordination Crisis Staff. The Steering Committee for Coordination and Management of the Crisis Management System again includes ministers, directors of relevant state bodies, the head of the Assessment Group, and a representative of the Committee on Defense and Security of the Assembly from the ranks of the members of the Committee belonging to the largest opposition political party and a representative of the Cabinet of the President.

Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, a number of CSOs have been active and prepared proposals, reactions and requests to state institutions for better crisis management and better protection of vulnerable and marginalized groups. However, the CSOs were not part of any of the national anti-crisis bodies until the declaration of a state of crisis, which was not the case at the local level, where CSOs were involved in some local anti-crisis bodies from the very beginning. Since December 2020, two representatives of the civil society sector in the field of human rights, selected through a public announcement, have participated, without right to vote, in the work of the General Crisis Management Staff. However, this was a belated reaction of this body, given that CSOs expressed their readiness and the need to be involved in the work of anti-crisis bodies in April 2020. In fact, the CSOs' Anti-Corruption Platform and other CSOs working in the field of good governance, through their representative in the Council for cooperation with and support to civil society, initiated the preparation of information on the measures taken by CSOs as a response to the Covid-19 pandemic and a request for involvement of CSOs' representatives in the relevant anti-crisis bodies which was adopted by the Council at its 20th session (16.04.2020) and sent to the Government.

CSOs' involvement in activities related to the creation of proposed measures and policies declined during the Covid-19 health crisis in 2020, compared to the pre-crisis period. According to survey[23], in 2018-2019, 76% of the CSOs were involved in such activities, while during the crisis in 2020, this percentage was 55%. Only 20% of the CSOs received an invitation to participate in presenting their proposals directly to the institutions. In 2018-2019, this percentage was three times higher, i.e. 62%. 53% of the organisations themselves initiated meetings with state institutions to present their proposed measures during the crisis, which is 23 percentage points less than in the period of 2018-2019. While the country was in a state of emergency, the Government adopted 250 Decrees with a force of law and after the end of the state of emergency, the state continued to adopt various types of measures to deal with Covid-19. Most of the draft-laws that referred to amendments or new laws proposed for implementation of the measures envisaged for dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic were not placed on ENER[24] for public consultation. CSOs were not recognized as a relevant consultation partner prior to the adoption of policies to prevent or assist in overcoming this pandemic. Although chambers of commerce were regularly consulted on the measures to be taken and their views taken into account to adjust policy in this way, the position of CSOs was not so relevant. Moreover, CSOs as a sector were not directly identified in the economic measures for dealing with Covid-19. This was especially evident at the beginning of the crisis, when the consultation process was really narrowed down.

However, the Government set a positive example by establishing the Economic Council, as a consultative body providing information, general guidance and feedback on economic measures to deal with the Covid-19 crisis in the Macedonian economy and the financial sector. In addition to government officials, the meetings are attended by representatives of political parties, the Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts, university professors, as well as chambers of commerce. Another positive example is the procedure and consultations with a greater number of stakeholders, established by the President, before each declaration of a state of emergency. The Security Council was obliged to hold meetings to which other stakeholders were invited to comment on the situation in terms of their area of action. In this way, the Security Council was able to make right decisions and advise the President on the basis of the most relevant and competent information.

[23] Covid-19 crisis effects on the activity and capacities of the civil society organizations

[24] Unique national electronic registry of regulations in the Republic of North Macedonia

Role and involvement of civil society in policy and decision-making in response to Covid-19 pandemic

Inclusive partnerships

In mid-June 2020, the Government upgraded the coronavirus.gov.mk application to provide the public with insight into the monetary and non-financial donations received by the government and state bodies to combat the coronavirus crisis, as well as to show how the money was spent. According to the data published in the section Covid-19 financial transparency[25] as of 25.11.2021, there are 1452 financial donations in the amount of about 241 million denars (about 3.9 million euros) and 115 non-financial donations in the amount of about 526 million denars (8, 6 million) registered. The site contains information on the date of donation received, name of donor, recipient, type, description and amount of the donation.

On the other hand, according to the data from the Secretariat for European Affairs, which is responsible for the coordination of activities for providing and receiving foreign aid in the country during the pandemic, in the period of March 1 – November 30, 2020, the non-financial assistance received by foreign international donors was 125, 7 million denars (about 2 million euros). However, it should be noted that in order to deal with the Covid-19 virus pandemic in the given period, in addition to the presented ones, donations of goods were received from foreign donors for which the donor did not provide the value, due to which they, despite their great importance, could not be expressed in value. However, according to the State Audit Office Report for 2020[26], a single central mechanism for receiving donations from foreign donors has not been established at the national level.

The Agency for Protection of the Right to Free Access to Public Information as an independent state body takes care of the realization of the constitutionally and legally guaranteed right to free access to public information, in accordance with the Law on Free Access to Public Information[27].

According to the reports from state institutions to the Agency, among other things, the state institutions were requested to provide data regarding the use of funds from the central budget to deal with Covid-19, the number of members of the Roma community infected with Covid-19, the number of patients cared for in the Covid centers of some medical centers, the number of hearings held and postponed during Covid-19, etc. According to the Agency's Annual Report for 2020[28], the Agency acted on a total of 1493 cases. The summarized results show that most of the complaints submitted to the Agency for 2020 exceed 80%, for cases of information holders' inaction after requests were submitted within the legally prescribed deadlines (20 days after request submission, or 30 days if the request requires extensive information), that is, due to the "silence of the administration".

[25] https://finansiskatransparentnost.koronavirus.gov.mk/?_ga=2.40794722.1796424247.1637783386-124990201.1632212177#/donation-financial-details

[26] [https://dzr.mk/sites/default/files/2021-](https://dzr.mk/sites/default/files/2021-07/56_RUS_Dobivanje_nefinansiska_pomos_raspredelba_koristenje_institucije_javen_sektor_covid_19_KOMPLET.pdf)

07/56_RUS_Dobivanje_nefinansiska_pomos_raspredelba_koristenje_institucije_javen_sektor_covid_19_KOMPLET.pdf

[27] "Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia" no. 101

[28] <https://aspi.mk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/%D0%93%D0%9E%D0%94%D0%98%D0%A8%D0%95%D0%9D-%D0%98%D0%97%D0%92%D0%95%D0%A8%D0%A2%D0%90%D0%88-2020.pdf>

Inclusive partnerships

According to the Agency's Annual Report, the right to free access to public information is mostly (about 80%) used by CSOs, as a tool for achieving goals related to the implementation of their own work programs. Based on an analysis conducted by the Center for Civil Communications in 2020, out of 460 requests for access to public information that were sent to state institutions, only 51% of the requests were answered within the maximum legal deadline of 20 days, 48% (221 requests) were answered after the legal deadline, while 1% (5 requests) were not answered by the institutions even after the positive decision of the Agency for Protection of the Right to Free Access to Public Information. The average number of days in which the institutions responded to the submitted requests for free access, which were subject to analysis, is 23 days.[29]

In April 2020, at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Government adopted a Decision on reallocation of funds among the budget users of the central government and among the funds which reduced the state funds for support of associations and foundations provided by the Budget of RNM for 2020 in the amount of about half a million euros. More specifically, the Decision provided for the complete abolition of the funds to be allocated through the General Secretariat of the Government from the budget item for support of CSOs, as well as through other institutions, such as the Ministry of Political System and Inter-Community Relations; Ministry of Economy; Ministry of Labor and Social Policy; Agency for Youth and Sports and Ministry of Justice.

However, due to the reactions of the Council, as well as the broad CSOs' reactions, most of these funds were reallocated to CSOs again, whereby most of them aimed at urgent measures to deal with the Covid-19 crisis. Thus, although 2020 was a difficult year for all, including CSOs, the Government did not increase the total funds to support associations and foundations, but even tried to drastically reduce state funding for CSOs.

In June 2020, the Government announced a call for project proposals of CSOs for measures to respond to the Covid-19 crisis, in the total amount of 30,000,000 denars. CSOs had six days to prepare the project proposal, yet 549 applications were received. Only after two days, the Government announced the decision to finance 40 project proposals in the amount of 29,647,474 denars, i.e. the members of the evaluation commission completed the administrative review and quality assessment of all 549 applications received in two days. There were several critical points that affected the transparency and accountability of the entire process, starting from the very short application deadlines, the composition of the evaluation commission, the big differences among the points for the same application given by different evaluation committee members, etc. Additionally, a complaint was lodged with the State Commission for Prevention of Corruption regarding the manner in which the funds were allocated. The SCPC adopted a Decision accepting this complaint with the explanation, that, inter alia, the payment of the approved funds made on July 1 was done during the election campaign and it was a violation of Article 8-a paragraph 1 line 2 of the Electoral Code and Article 34 of the Law on Prevention of Corruption. The Secretary General of the Government appealed against this decision before the Administrative Court. After reviewing this case, the Administrative Court ruled to annul the SCPC decision. According to the Report on Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development 2020[30], civil society organisations have received limited financial support to deal with the Covid-19 crisis.

[29] https://www.ccc.org.mk/images/stories/aspmk.pdf?fbclid=IwAR2td_tD_CA5t1YH4YvD9Z88nVnnpDPALLDPaXDEqQt-Kt4767BDzP66384

[30] Report on Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development 2020

Inclusive partnerships

According to the results of the survey conducted for the needs of this report, 87.75% of CSOs did not receive any kind of additional funding. As for the remaining 36 CSOs (12.3%) that received financial support, the support was mainly provided by foreign donors or public institutions (Government, Ministry of Culture and the Commission for Religious Communities). According to Catalyst Balkan, donations in 2020 were mainly given for overcoming the Covid-19 crisis.[31] More specifically, 5,085,162.96 euros were donated to Global Health Emergency in various types of donations. Most of the donations come from companies (734 donations) and individuals (335 donations). 34 CSOs are registered as donors, and 223 CSOs as beneficiaries of donations. CSOs have not experienced major violations of freedom of association, assembly and expression or any other violations of rights and freedoms since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. According to the Report on Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development 2020, 17 organisations (5.8%) out of a total of 293 that participated in the survey answered in the affirmative to this question, citing as main reasons: inadequacy of measures according to the specifics of the target group; inability to organize field activities and inability to establish contact with relevant institutions.[32]

The biggest challenge to freedom of peaceful assembly in 2020 was identified during the state of emergency. Namely, restrictive measures were introduced to protect citizens and prevent pandemics, such as curfew, restriction of non-essential movements or gatherings, freezing of air traffic and closing of borders, suspension of procedural deadlines in court proceedings and transition to online education. During the year, a Decree with a force of law was issued banning public gatherings, in order to prevent the spread of Covid-19. After the end of the state of emergency, this ban ended and the Government made a decision on public gatherings, but with specific protocols and measures to prevent Covid-19. Due to restrictive measures, 41.3% of the CSOs that participated in the survey were not able to participate or organize a peaceful assembly during 2020, which is significantly different from 2019 when 60.7% of respondents participated in a public gathering, either individually or through the organisation (both as participants and as organizers).

In 2020, the Law on Value Added Tax (VAT) was amended in a way to implement the necessary changes to deal with Covid-19. By the adopted amendments, the turnover of goods and services that are given as a donation to a budget user for dealing with Covid-19 is exempted from value added tax. The turnover of goods and services performed by a budget user to deal with the coronavirus, which is paid with funds from donations received by the budget user is also exempted from value added tax.

In 2020, A Decree with a force of law was adopted for the application of the Law on Donations and Sponsorships in Public Activities, in order to regulate the public interest of donations in a form of financial means, goods and services where the recipient of the donation is a budget user, to resolve the conditions caused by Covid-19 on the territory of Republic of North Macedonia. However, the associations were not included, even though many of the associations were also on the ground providing assistance. Donations to associations were not subject to the facilitated procedure and thus CSOs were not recognized as stakeholders channeling donations and that those donations should be subject to facilitated procedure.

[31] <https://catalystbalkans.org/en/report/donations-per-country>

[32] Report on Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development 2020

Good practices of CSOs



In the crisis situation caused by Covid-19, the CSOs were among the first to recognize the urgency and show great solidarity in providing support to marginalized groups and vulnerable communities.

Many of them recognized the urgency, took steps of solidarity with their communities, and found ways to be beneficial for their target groups. The organisations have adapted to the new situation and shifted their regular activities, and some of their project activities, to meet the needs of people while dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic. The problem of citizens' lack of information, especially of the most vulnerable categories, was largely addressed by CSOs through their preparation and sharing of information, announcements, tips and guidelines for health care and coping with the crisis caused by Covid-19 intended for the target groups.

The organisations which provide free legal aid as part of their regular activities or have other relevant expertise reacted quickly and redirected their activities to providing free legal aid, psychological support and other SOS support lines for relevant target groups in crisis as well as assistance and support services for victims of domestic violence.

Research and analysis organisations, government watchdog organisations, or those that regularly monitor the respect for human rights, as well as many other organisations, have developed and shared many analyses and pieces of research on the impact of Covid-19 in the respective areas.

However, the organisations not only researched but also reacted to state institutions on issues they considered to have expertise about and could help better deal with the crisis together. Individual organisations, platforms and networks as well as informally organized groups of organisations prepared and sent joint proposals, reactions, requests to state institutions. By doing so, the organisations have shown that they are open to mutual cooperation and act together before government institutions on issues and requests crucial for the wellbeing of the target groups and the citizens in general. One should not leave out and forget the efforts and initiatives of a number of organisations that worked on providing tools, educational and resource materials for the target groups.

Good practices of CSOs

Policy advocacy



Since the beginning of the pandemic, the Association for Emancipation, Solidarity and Equality of Women - ESE has taken a proactive role in solving the problems of the target groups by giving concrete initiatives, proposals and requests to state institutions.

The following text lists some of the requests to state institutions as well as the responsiveness of state institutions to these requests.

In April 2020, the association sent an Urgent Recommendation for cooperation and coordination of the competent institutions for protection of women who suffered domestic violence in times of crisis and state of emergency^[33], which was taken into account and responded by the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy.^[34]

In April 2020, the association supported the request of the Association for Development and Promotion of the Roma Community Romano Chachipe to improve the protection of the population in the municipality of Suto Orizari from the spread of the Covid-19 epidemic by providing additional point for testing, disinfection and information.^[35] The request was reviewed by the General Coordination Crisis Staff, which gave a recommendation^[36] that the Ministry of Health act in accordance with the request.

Due to the deteriorating situation in the municipality of Suto Orizari, the association ESE in partnership with several other associations submitted a new request for undertaking preventive measures to prevent the spread of the Covid-19 epidemic in the municipality of Suto Orizari.^[37] The request was answered by the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy with specific activities undertaken by this ministry to overcome the crisis situation in the municipality of Suto Orizari.^[38]

In April 2020, twenty CSOs, including the association ESE, submitted to the Government an Intervention to amend the Decree with a force of law for the implementation of the Law on Social Protection during a state of emergency. This request was answered positively by the state institutions with the adoption of a Decree on changing the criteria for exercising and using the right to guaranteed minimum assistance.^[39]

[33] <https://fosm.mk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/preporaki-za-itna-zashtita-od-semejno-nasilstvo.pdf>

[34] <https://fosm.mk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/odgovor-semejno-nasilstvo.pdf>

[35] https://fosm.mk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/1-19_1.pdf

[36] <https://fosm.mk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/2-odgovor-na-baraneto-od-glavniot-koordinativen-krizen-shtab.pdf>

[37] <https://fosm.mk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/3-barane-za-prezemane-na-preventivni-merki-za-sprechuvane-na-shireneto-na-epidemijata-so-kovid-19-vo-opshтинata-shuto-orizari.pdf>

[38] <https://fosm.mk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/5-odgovor-od-ministerstvoto-za-trud-i-socijalna-politika-na-baraneto-od-9.4.2020.pdf>

[39] <https://fosm.mk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/9-odgovor-od-ministerstvoto-za-trud-i-socijalna-politika-na-urgencijata-od-15.4.2020.pdf>

Good practices of CSOs



Response to the basic needs of constituencies

Food for all - Food Bank MK is an organisation that actively works on collecting surplus food from all food operators (producers, distributors and traders) and distributes it in the form of social packages to the poor and socially disadvantaged categories of citizens.

In 2020, the organisation managed to collect and distribute over 280 tons of food and over 8 tons of hygiene items, whereas in 2021 it is expected to collect and distribute over 320 tons of food and over 3 tons of hygiene items. On a monthly basis, depending on the donations received, on average, the organisation provides food for 1000 to 1100 families or about 2500 to 3000 persons. About 300 persons from 11 towns in the country are regular users for whom the organisation provides meals on a daily basis.

In May 2021, Food Bank MK together with other local organisations organized the caravan Standing together against Covid-19 and hunger, distributing over 25 tons of food and disinfectants to over 5300 citizens in about 20 towns in the country.



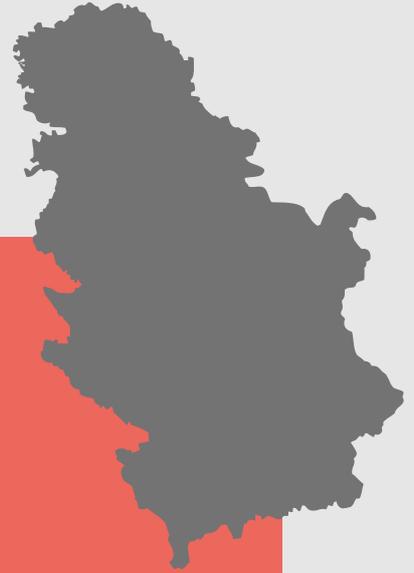
Community mobilization and other transformative actions

Rural Coalition, comprising 40 local associations, works on improving the conditions in rural areas for establishing sustainable family farms through direct support, capacity building, contribution to balanced regional development and participation in the creation of local and national agrarian policy.

At the end of 2020, Rural Coalition initiated the creation of the first virtual rural women's E-marketplace. 100 women on this platform <https://www.nasatezga.mk/> promote their products, which is very beneficial particularly in time of Covid-19. The coalition plans to register a social enterprise in 2022, to establish a complete collection and distribution system, and to invest in the promotion of the platform.

Since March 2021, a local e-support center has been functioning in Kicevo for applying and receiving E-services, which is one of the three such centers in the country, and one of the 15 local centers in the Western Balkans whose goal is to facilitate the communication of the citizens electronically with the institutions. Within this center, Rural Coalition works with the population in rural areas in order to increase their digital skills, the practical use of available E-services through the national portal for E-services www.uslugi.gov.mk, as well as electronic application for subsidies.

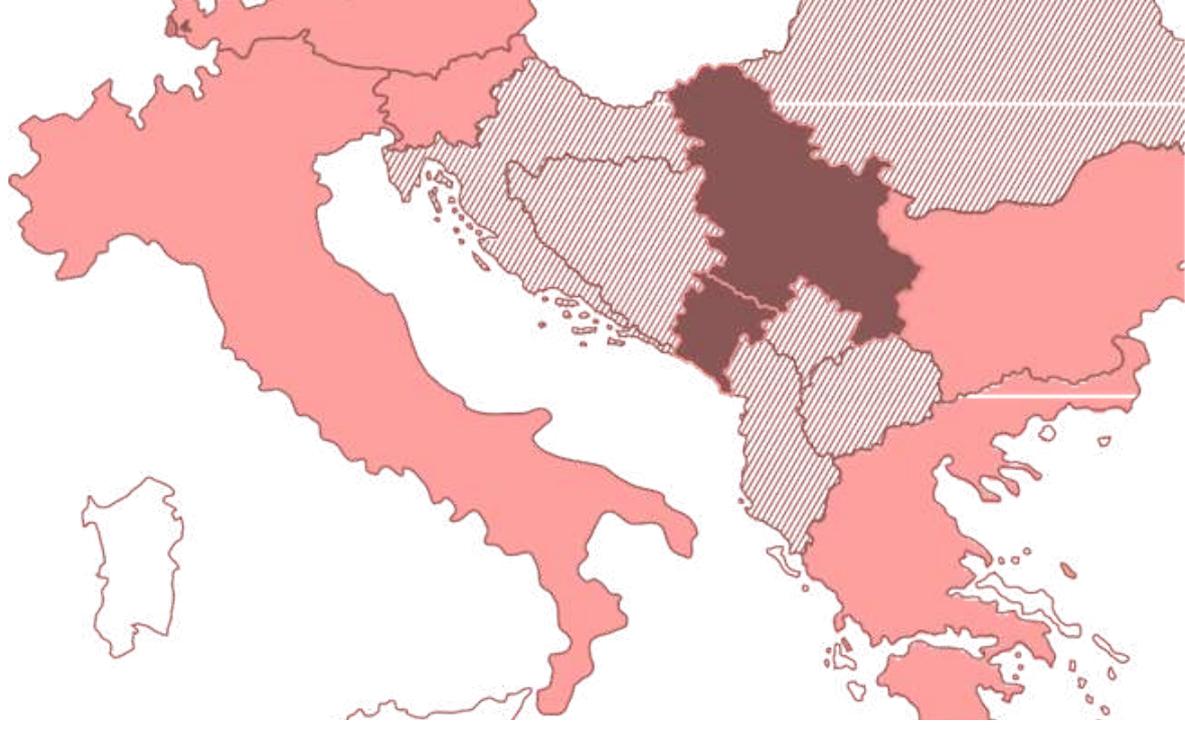
Furthermore, the first platform for e-agricultural services was created <https://e-zemjodelskiuslugi.mk/> This activity was further expanded through cooperation with the municipalities to increase the available E-services at the local level.



COUNTRY CASE STUDY
REPORT

SERBIA

PREPARED BY
CIVIC INITIATIVES



SERBIA

General overview of the country

According to 2020 data from the World Bank, the population of Serbia is 6.908 million.[1] Information on average population density is available only for specific regions, but not for the country as a whole. Data shows that Belgrade is the region with the largest population density with 523 inhabitants per square kilometre, while the regions of Southern and Eastern Serbia are the least densely populated.

When it comes to gender distribution, men make up 48.7% and women account for 51.3% of the total population of Serbia. Data shows that, along with general population decline, there has been a decline in the share of the population up to the age of fourteen and the increase in population aged over 65 in the past 20 years.[2] According to data from 2018, the median age of the population is 43.16 years.[3]

The ethnic composition of Serbia is as follows: 83.3% of the population identify as Serbs, 3.5% Hungarians, 2.1% Roma, 2% Bosniaks, 0.8% Croats, 0.7% Slovaks, 0.5% Montenegrins, 0.5 % Vlachs, 0.4% Romanians, 0.3% Yugoslavs, 0.3% Macedonians, 0.3% Muslims and around 5% other. [4]

According to employment data for the fourth quarter of 2021, the active workforce in Serbia amounted to 2,917,400 people, and the number of the unemployed to 316 700. The employment rate for the same period was 50.0% and the unemployment rate was 9.8%.[5]



[1] "Population, total - Serbia". World Bank official website. Available at: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=RS&most_recent_value_desc=false

[2] "Serbia - Population: demographic situation, languages and religions". Eurydice Network official website. Available at:

https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/population-demographic-situation-languages-and-religions-66_en

[3] "АКТУЕЛНИ ДЕМОГРАФСКИ ПОКАЗАТЕЉИ (Current Demography)". Ministry of Demography and Population Policy of Serbia official website.

Available at: <https://www.mdpp.gov.rs/demografija-aktuelni-pokazatelji.php>

[4] "Serbia - Population: demographic situation, languages and religions". Eurydice Network official website.

[5] "Labour market dynamics in the fourth quarter 2021". Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia official website. Available at: <https://www.stat.gov.rs/en-us/vesti/20220228-anketa-o-radnoj-snazi-iv-kv-2021/?s=2400>

The socio-economic impact of Covid-19 in the country

The first case of Covid-19 in Serbia was reported in March of 2020, and infections progressed rapidly from there. After 60 days following the first registered case of infection, there were more than 10 000 infected reported by official sources, which was the highest number in the region at the time. In this period, Serbia registered 38 deaths from Covid-19 per million inhabitants, compared to 13 in Albania, 53 in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 20 in Kosovo and 137 in North Macedonia. Following the first reported infection, Serbia has experienced several waves of the pandemic. The second wave lasted from early June to mid-September 2020, the third from October to December 2020 with significantly higher incidence rates and a fourth wave from mid-February to the end of April 2021.[6] As of March 3 2022, official sources report 1,919,327 cases and 15,346 registered deaths.[7] The fatality rate is 0.80%.

However, there has been significant doubt as to whether official figures underestimate the real human cost of the pandemic.[8] Having previously begun the vaccination of health workers at the highest risk of infection, followed by elderly people, Serbia began mass vaccinations on 19 January 2021.[9] Unlike data on number of infections and deaths, data on vaccine doses administered as well as the prevalence of vaccination is not transparent and publicly available. According to Our World in Data, as of March 2022, Serbia has administered 8.47 M vaccine doses, with 3.26 M or 47.2% of people fully vaccinated.[10]

[6] "Multi-dimensional Review of the Western Balkans : Assessing Opportunities and Constraints". OECD Development Centre. June 2021. Available at: https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/development/multi-dimensional-review-of-the-western-balkans_4d5cbc2a-en

[7] "Latest Information on Covid-19 in the Republic of Serbia". Ministry of Health of the Republic of Serbia Official Covid-19 information portal. Available at: <https://covid19.rs/homepage-english/> (accessed on 03.03.2022.)

[8] See: "BIRN: Number of dead from Covid-19 in Serbia much higher; doctor explains". NI website. Available at:

<https://rs.niinfo.com/english/news/a612608-birn-number-of-dead-from-Covid-19-in-serbia-much-higher-doctor-explains/>

[9] "Mass vaccination in Serbia starts today". Serbian Government official website. Available at: <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/en/166398/mass-vaccination-in-serbia-starts-today-.php>

[10] "Coronavirus (Covid-19) Vaccinations". Our World In Data website. Available at: https://ourworldindata.org/covid-vaccinations?country=OWID_WRL



Government implemented intervention to address economic and social challenges from Covid-19

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and its economic consequences on Serbia's population and economy have been assessed as relatively moderate. Serbian government authorities mobilised sizable fiscal resources to mitigate the impact of illness and strict confinement measures on people and firms.[11] A comprehensive package of monetary, fiscal and banking emergency measures were implemented by the government with the aim to mitigate the negative economic impact of the crisis. An overview of the economic measures adopted in 2020 in response to the crisis as mapped by the OECD is represented in the following table:

Policy measures on people

- One-off financial assistance for all pensioners (RSD 7 billion [Serbian dinar]) and temporary benefit to beneficiaries who have exercised their rights (RSD 4 000).
- Universal cash transfer of EUR 100 to each citizen older than age 18 (RSD 70 billion).
- Assistance in hygiene packages and essential food products for 14 000 vulnerable women.
- Programme (My first salary) to support youth employment through wage subsidies and training (RSD 2 billion). The programme target was to benefit 10 000 young graduates from November 2020.
- Public-sector health workers were given a one-off assistance of RSD 10 000 (estimated total of 0.02 percent of GDP) in December 2020.

Policy measures on businesses

- Support to private-sector activity and employment through government payment of a net minimum wage to every employee of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) for three months and two months of 60% of the net minimum wage for the same group. For larger enterprises, government payment of 50% of the minimum wage for each employee on involuntary leave for five months.
- Loan guarantee schemes for the maintenance of liquidity and working capital for small business owners, SMEs and agricultural enterprises worth EUR 2 billion.
- Deferral of payroll taxes and contributions over a period of four months.
- Deferral of advance payments of corporate income tax for March, April and May 2020 until the submission of final returns for fiscal year 2020.
- Special call by the Serbian Innovation Fund for innovative proposals by MSMEs to respond to the pandemic.
- Support to the tourism sector: 160 000 holiday vouchers distributed by the government, as well as direct aid to the hotel and leisure sector amounting to approximately RSD 1.4 billion.
- Working capital loans provided by the Development Fund for SMEs to companies in the medical supplies and tourism and hospitality sectors.
- The City of Belgrade decided not to charge rent for business/office space during the state of emergency.
- Facilitation of eligibility criteria for loans and financial assistance provided to farmers.
- The Development Fund provided loans with longer repayment periods (up to five years) to the most vulnerable sectors (hoteliers, travel agencies, etc.) to improve their liquidity and working capital.

[11] "Multi-dimensional Review of the Western Balkans: Assessing Opportunities and Constraints". OECD Development Centre. June 2021.

Policy measures taken on health and other measures

- 10% wage increase for the public healthcare sector (RSD 13 billion) and increased healthcare spending to about RSD 12 billion.
- Employment of 2 500 additional health workers (doctors and nurses).
- EU package of EUR 93 million (EUR 15 million for immediate purchase and transport of medical equipment and EUR 78 million for economic recovery).
- Bilateral support from Hungary and the United States for medical supplies.

No measures specifically directed towards CSOs were adopted by the government. Several financial measures that CSOs were eligible for, but which were aimed more broadly at all employers/commercial subjects were enacted, such as the state covering a portion of employees' wages, and the option to delay/defer the payment of taxes and fringe benefits on employee salaries. No specific philanthropic incentives or instances of systemic non-financial support were recorded, and government attitudes towards civil society and its financial sustainability and viability remain unchanged.



Impacts on the economy

With a relatively low economic contraction in 2020, Serbia has been assessed as being among the least affected by the Covid-19 pandemic in emerging Europe. Despite suffering a heavy recession during the first wave and lockdown, Serbia's economy weathered the crisis relatively well with significant government support. After growing by 4.2% in 2019, the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia estimates that GDP fell by 1% in real terms in 2020. After falling by 0.6% in the first quarter of 2020, GDP contracted by 9.2% in the second quarter after lockdown and containment measures were introduced, but recovered in the third and fourth quarters.

The economic consequences of the pandemic manifested differently in different sectors of the Serbian economy, with services sectors having been the most affected during the pandemic. According to World Bank Data, leisure services fell by 14.6% in real terms during 2020, professional services and administration by 9%, and wholesale and retail trade, the second largest contributor to GDP, declined by 5.2%. Despite strong quarter-on-quarter recoveries, these services sectors could not make up for lost business during the first half of the year. Manufacturing production was expected to decline due to the disruption in supply chains. While industrial sectors, excluding construction, fell by 12% between the first and second quarter, they rebounded strongly. Construction, on the other hand, closed the year with a 5.1% fall in value added. The recovery of certain key sectors shows their resilience in the face of sizable disruption, noting that exports and imports both decreased by around 20% and consumption dropped by 7.2% in the second quarter of 2020.[12]

[12] "Multi-dimensional Review of the Western Balkans: Assessing Opportunities and Constraints". OECD Development Centre. June 2021.



Impact on people

Certain segments of the population were more affected than others, such as workers in the informal sector, women in smallholder agriculture, and the elderly. Data on employment and the consequences of the pandemic shows that 85% of workers whose employment was terminated in the 1st quarter of 2020 were informal workers, and that many did not benefit from any regular or Covid-19 specific social protection measures. The Roma national minority was particularly affected, as Roma in informal and formal settlements suffered from lack of access to water and power, leaving them without the necessary preconditions to act in accordance with recommended safety measures. Furthermore, poorer households also had difficulties to ensure the participation of their children in online schooling, having no access to an active internet connection and personal electronic devices.[13]

This is only one example of how, when implementing economic crisis measures, the Serbian government failed to take into account the needs of the most marginalised communities in Serbia. To that end, Roma without an ID card and permanent residence were excluded from state stimulus measures introduced to mitigate the consequences of the pandemic. In 2020 and 2021, payments of 80 and 100 EUR were issued to all adult Serbian citizens with an ID and registered permanent residence who applied for them. However, persons who did not have an ID card and a registered permanent residence, who are almost exclusively members of the Roma community, were therefore not eligible for this form of assistance. Additionally, this cash benefit failed to account for the needs of families with children, as only persons who had reached the age of majority were able to apply. Consequently, families with children and especially families with several children received proportionately less financial support.[14]

Women are particularly exposed to the collateral effects of Covid-19. As in other economies, loss of employment and lockdown conditions in Serbia raised concerns about increased exposure to the risk of domestic violence during the first wave of the Covid-19 crisis. This led to calls from the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality and civil society organisations to ensure that protective measures were in place. Furthermore, in Serbia, as in other countries, women make up the majority of the healthcare workforce, which has exposed them to greater risk of infection. At the same time, women shouldered much of the burden at home, given school closures were instituted and prolonged to help prevent the spread of Covid-19, as well as long standing gender inequalities in unpaid work that persist in Serbia.[15]

[13] "The Impact of Covid19 in Serbia: A new report and call for action from the United Nations". UN Development System in Serbia. September 2020. Available at: <https://serbia.un.org/en/92908-impact-covid19-serbia-new-report-and-call-action-united-nations>

[14] "Alternative Report for the 71st Session of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights - Review of Serbia's third periodic report". The Platform of Organizations for Cooperation with UN Human Rights Mechanisms. January 2022. Available at: https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/SessionDetails1.aspx?SessionID=2521&Lang=en

[15] "The Impact of Covid19 in Serbia: A new report and call for action from the United Nations". UN Development System in Serbia. September 2020.

Another vulnerable group that was additionally placed at risk during the pandemic were victims of human trafficking. Those human trafficking survivors, who were previously employed, were among the first to lose their jobs in the pandemic. An additional burden was created by the abolition of some services for human trafficking victims, which led to civil society stepping up its services to fill the gap. Estimates say that in Serbia, state institutions in the field of protection of victims of trafficking managed to respond to only 30% of the needs of trafficking victims in 2020, while the remaining 70% were covered by civil society organizations. For example, the state-run emergency shelter for trafficking victims was closed in August 2020, so all the beneficiaries who were accommodated there were referred to shelters run by CSO Atina.[16]

Furthermore, the Covid-19 pandemic and state measures undertaken, or lack thereof, had particular consequences on the rights and status of persons with disabilities. As residential social care facilities present an environment where there is an increased risk of transmission, there was a need to urgently relocate those receiving care in such institutions into the community during the pandemic. Unfortunately, the government instead decided to completely close the facilities during the pandemic, banning visits to users, leading to increased and uncontrolled spread of the infection among both users and employees.[17]

Young people were also particularly affected. The first documented cases of Covid-19 infection among students from student dormitories appeared at the end of May 2020. Following that, the infection quickly and easily spread despite all preventive measures taken, primarily due to dense collective accommodation and living conditions in dormitories. In the first and second week of June the number of sick students who reported to medics in the respiratory clinic of the Institute for Students' Healthcare increased daily, but until June 12, 2020, only serology was available as a diagnostic tool to doctors at the Institute, and those tests are able to show the infection after 9-10 days of infection. The closing of schools also disproportionately negatively affected members of vulnerable groups, who are more likely to drop out of school or leave school prematurely. Schools closing had a particularly negative effect on young people from minority groups, poor young people and those from rural areas without access to electricity, internet, computers, and other means necessary for communication, information, and distance learning; among other challenges; and young people with disabilities who are not self-employed, due to restrictive measures that included staying at home during the ban. Furthermore, having to retreat to their families due to schools and dormitories closing, many LGBTI young people also found themselves in a hostile family environment.[18]

[16] "Alternative Report for the 71st Session of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights - Review of Serbia's third periodic report". The Platform of Organizations for Cooperation with UN Human Rights Mechanisms. January 2022.

[17] "Consequences of Covid-19 on the position of vulnerable and at-risk groups", OHCHR & SIPRU Team, 2020.

[18] "Youth Specific Alternative Report to the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights". Programme of the Belgrade Centre for Human Rights, Civic Initiatives, National Association of Practitioners of Youth Work et al. January 2022. Available at: https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/SessionDetails1.aspx?SessionID=2521&Lang=en

Role and involvement of civil society in policy and decision-making in response to Covid-19 pandemic

Ownership

There is no national strategy or governmental strategic plan for Covid-19 in Serbia. However, a number of different regulations of the Republic of Serbia were adopted related to prevention of the spread of Covid-19, which significantly hindered the enjoyment of the three fundamental freedoms in pandemic times, especially for the duration of the state of emergency. Starting from March 12th, 2020 the Minister of Health issued ordinances banning gatherings in the Republic of Serbia in indoor public places, progressively decreasing the number of people allowed to gather from 100, to 50, to 5. Complete restriction of gatherings outdoors lasted during all 52 days of the state of emergency. During the state of emergency, the longest continuous curfew, which lasted for 84 hours, was imposed to prevent people from attending church services during the liturgy for Orthodox Easter. None of these measures were enacted in a transparent or consultative manner, and they significantly hindered the functioning of civil society, as will be elaborated on below.

No strategic documents nor the established response bodies to the pandemic situation, have not been prepared or created based on a multi-stakeholder participation from the parliament, civil society, private sector, subnational government and development partners in these bodies. There is no participation in the design, implementation, and monitoring of national strategies and policies for Covid-19 response. During 2021, CSO "United against COVID" established by medical staff and critical about the way the Serbian government handled the crisis, published their own proposal to the health authorities in the "Strategy for the suppression of the coronavirus virus epidemic in the Republic of Serbia and its consequences".^[19] This document was compiled by experts in epidemiology, public health, immunology, clinical biochemistry, pulmonology and infectology from the United Against Kovid Association of Physicians, with the support of a number of initiatives and individuals.

When it comes to the development and implementation of new epidemiological measures/ crisis response, the competent body in Serbia is the Crisis Staff, which is composed of government officials and medical professionals. Serbian government enacted The Decision on Establishment of Crisis Staff for Control of Infectious Disease Covid-19^[20] on 30 October 2020. This Crisis Staff is tasked to monitor the situation, coordinate actions and activities of all relevant institutions and authorities, as well as organisations and service providers. Also, the Crisis Staff proposes and recommends measures to control pandemic and protect the population from the infectious disease of Covid-19.

[19] "Strategy for the suppression of the coronavirus virus epidemic in the Republic of Serbia and its consequences", United against Covid, December 2021. Available at: <https://ujedinjeni-protiv-kovida.net/2021/12/06/strategija-upk/>

[20] The Decision on Establishment of Crisis Centre for Control of Infectious Disease Covid-19. Available at: <https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/odluka-o-obrazovanju-kriznog-staba-za-suzbijanje-zarazne-bolesti-Covid-19.html>

No CSO representatives are involved in the working of this body, and there is no established mechanism for CSOs to offer input on new measures and policies and crisis management. CSOs that deal with social and economic rights and social protection have criticised several measures that have been adopted in response to Covid-19 from the aspect of human rights, such as the fact that financial aid provided to individuals was inaccessible to citizens without official ID documentation, which left out a significant number of marginalised Roma people from the scope of these measures. These CSOs have stated that civil society involvement in managing the Covid-19 crisis response could ensure better consideration of marginalised groups in further measures.

However, in a separate development, in 2020, the Crisis Staff of the City of Bor issued an unconstitutional order requiring all citizens' associations and voluntary societies to make all their human resources available to assist the oldest citizens in order to supply food and medicine for them. Such an order is blatantly unconstitutional given that the Law on Disaster Risk Reduction and Emergency Management and declaring the emergency situation is cited as the legal basis. Furthermore, it is based on the 15th March 2020 decision to declare a state of emergency, with the signature of the President of the Republic, the Prime Minister and the President of the National Assembly. Due to the reaction of numerous CSOs, this decision was subsequently withdrawn[21]

Inclusive partnership

During the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic no measures were undertaken by the responsible department, the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Issues, to protect the most vulnerable citizens. The All Initiative for Economic and Social Rights urged the Government of the Republic of Serbia to undertake such actions immediately. In a statement they said that Covid-19 measures must be based on the core values underlying economic and social rights, and with timely, clear, concrete and targeted measures to provide protection to the most vulnerable based on the principles of non-discrimination and the maximum use of available resources[22].

Restrictions on the movement of citizens have greatly hindered the normal functioning of CSOs engaged in activities of general interest, especially the ones which provide citizens with certain services that can help them during the Covid-19 crisis. Namely, the introduction of a curfew prohibited movement unless it concerns citizens who have been issued with permits to move between 5 pm and 5 am. Such a licence could only be given to persons employed in public companies and companies performing activities of general interest. However, non-profit associations were not eligible to apply to obtain this permit. For this reason, CSOs have launched an initiative to develop clear CSO licensing procedures, with a proposal that involves the active involvement of the Office for Cooperation with Civil Society, which, in cooperation with representatives of associations, will consider the validity of the submitted requests before sending it to the Ministry of Interior for a final decision. This solution was of great importance given that many CSOs carry out activities that involve activists in the field, such as those engaged in delivering humanitarian assistance, providing legal assistance or support to vulnerable groups (people with disabilities, Roma, children, the elderly and sick, migrants, the homeless, etc.). Civic Initiatives created a survey that sought to address the needs and activities of CSOs during the state of emergency. It also maps and references organisations that will assist citizens throughout the pandemic[23].

[20] The Decision on Establishment of Crisis Centre for Control of Infectious Disease Covid-19. Available at:

<https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/odluka-o-obrazovanju-kriznog-staba-za-suzbijanje-zarazne-bolesti-Covid-19.html>

[21] "Monitoring Matrix on Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development, Country Report Serbia 2020". Civic Initiatives. March 2021.

Available at: <https://www.gradjanske.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Monitoring-Matrix-2020-.pdf>

[22] The All Initiative for Economic and Social Rights statement. Available at: <https://www.allinitiative.org/srbija-jedina-u-regionu-nije-preduzela-posebne-mere-zastite-za-najsiromasnije/>

[23] "Monitoring Matrix on Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development, Country Report Serbia 2020". Civic Initiatives. March 2021.

Available at: <https://www.gradjanske.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Monitoring-Matrix-2020-.pdf>

During the state of emergency, the government announced that all information about the coronavirus epidemic can only come from the Republic's Crisis Staff, while local media or unauthorised persons publishing such information would be sanctioned. Within this decision, a framework for legal prosecution of ineligible journalists was also established, and in the wake of it, the arrest of journalist Ana Lalic took place. She was detained for 48 hours on suspicion that she might repeat the crime of "publishing texts that cause panic and trouble", after publishing a text on the working conditions in the Clinical Centre of Vojvodina, and now faces a trial. After domestic and international organisations reacted strongly to this case, the decision to centralise information was revoked, but the government announced a "stronger fight against fake news".

Under the pretext of protecting journalists from infection, the Government has adopted a measure that prevents them from attending Republic's Crisis Staff press conferences. Journalists are not allowed to participate in the conference via video link, but only allowed to submit written questions no later than 2 pm every day. CSOs have reacted that this measure opens up the possibility of censorship, arbitrary choice of questions, as well as avoiding answers to questions, which most often leaves the questions of local outlets unanswered.

Independent journalists and media have been further affected by the state of emergency in Serbia, with tabloid campaigns and frequent attacks on media outlets and journalists coming from top state officials and pro-regime media continuing in the absence of any reaction from authorities[24].

In contrast to 2020, when epidemiological measures were more strict, there were instances of direct institutional pressure related to Covid-19 measures that negatively affected these freedoms (e.g. arrests of journalists for reporting on hospital conditions, a government decree preventing media reporting on Covid-19 based on information not provided by the government, etc). However, indirect pressures from private actors connected with the government have been recorded that infringe on the rights to freedom of association and expression. In Novi Pazar, 37 SLAPP suits have been lodged by the acting director of the City's hospital, Meho Mahmutović, against doctors and activists that have criticised his handling of the coronavirus crisis in the city. Mahmutović lodged 7 criminal complaints against activist and founder of CSO "Free Citizens' Initiative" Aladin Paučinac, demanding penalties of around three million RSD for insults to his person, published by Paučinac on social media and spoken during protests. In 2021, courts in Novi Pazar found Paučinac guilty in three of these cases, and his lawyers have announced they will appeal them at a higher instance[25].

When it comes to freedom of assembly, there have been recorded cases of private actors weaponizing epidemiological concerns and the state apparatus to curb protest activity and protect private interests. In May of 2021, criminal complaints were filed by private individuals against three civic activists from Leskovac due to alleged failure to act pursuant to health regulations during an epidemic, in accordance with Article 248 of the Serbian Criminal Code, which carries a potential sentence of three years in prison. They stand accused of organising protests against an investor who planned to build in the area where a local park is currently located, and the complaints were lodged by the owners of the company carrying out the project. When questioned by police, the activists named in the complaints maintained that the protests were a spontaneous gathering of citizens and neighbours from surrounding buildings, and that none of them took active steps to call others to take part in the demonstrations. Furthermore, the gatherings were held respecting all epidemiological restrictions[26].

[22] The All Initiative for Economic and Social Rights statement. Available at: <https://www.allinitiative.org/srbija-jedina-u-regionu-nije-preduzela-posebne-mere-zastite-za-najsiromasnije/>

[23] "Monitoring Matrix on Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development, Country Report Serbia 2020". Civic Initiatives. March 2021. Available at: <https://www.gradjanske.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Monitoring-Matrix-2020-.pdf>

[24] "Monitoring Matrix on Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development, Country Report Serbia 2020". Civic Initiatives. March 2021. Available at: <https://www.gradjanske.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Monitoring-Matrix-2020-.pdf>

[25] "Three Freedoms Under Magnifying Glass". Available at: <https://www.gradjanske.org/en/category/news/three-freedoms-under-the-magnifying-glass/>

[26] "Three Freedoms Under Magnifying Glass". Available at: <https://www.gradjanske.org/en/category/news/three-freedoms-under-the-magnifying-glass/>

In 2020, CSOs have advocated for donors to focus on not prolonging current calls and payments, as well as allocating funds from additional pools to help CSOs, instead of redirecting the support. As a positive example, The Swiss Agency, through the ACT project, has decided to provide additional funds to 3 organisations that will be supported in helping vulnerable groups in Serbia. Open calls for proposals from diverse donors have been launched, such as the UNDP call for innovation in crisis time; Central European Initiative – Emergency Call for Proposals for Covid-19 2020. Moreover, Trag Foundation created a program to support the solidarity among the citizens by relying on their capacities, taking into account the safety and health in the community. It is expected to implement actions to reduce the further spread of the virus, to help the most vulnerable, and to launch operations focused on the recovery and resilience of communities from the economic and other social consequences. The Foundation Ana i Vlade Divac announced a specific call for associations, media, and grassroots organisations gathered around a joint idea to help citizens in facing the crisis.

In 2021, calls for financing CSO projects have adapted to the COVID pandemic, with donors considering altered circumstances. For example, a large number of donors required CSOs applying for funds to reflect the potential impact of Covid-19 on project activities, allowing space for amending project modalities in case of unexpected circumstances. Additionally, a significant number of donors provide funding for projects specifically related to COVID. For example, the project “For an Active Civil Society Together – ACT” funded by the Swiss Government, through the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) has funded projects related to the response of civil society to the Covid-19 pandemic and plans to continue to doing so in 2022[26].

As for state support, at the start of the Office for Cooperation with Civil Society (OCCS) informed CSOs that due to the introduction of the state of emergency, the procedure for awarding grants from the budget of the Republic of Serbia for 2020 is suspended. The OCCS based its decision on Article 101 of the Law on General Administrative Procedure and the legality of the decision is indisputable. However, the question remains whether such a decision was legitimate at this time as it threatens the financial sustainability of organisations and the people whose existence is dependent on the revenues generated from these sources. The OCCS also stated that following the end of the state of emergency, a new public competition for co-financing EU projects would be announced.

[26] “Donors approaches”, Balkan Civil Society Development Network. Available at: <http://bcp.balkancsd.net/Covid-19-regional-overview/donors-responses/>

Good practices of CSOs

Policy advocacy

The Initiative for Economic and Social Rights (A11 Initiative), which promotes and protects the rights of individuals from vulnerable, marginalised and discriminated groups, with a particular focus on economic and social rights, has had a special focus and published several reports and recommendations aimed at policy decision-makers to improve the position of vulnerable groups during the Covid-19 pandemic.

In its Position of Tradeswomen During the Pandemic of Covid-19 report, which deals with women workers who belong to risk groups due to their age, health condition or illness, those who are on the frontline in contact with the infected or the general population, as well as with each other, and women workers engaged in professions where the so-called social distancing cannot be practised, the A11 Initiative proposed a set of further steps and recommendations on how to improve the position of this risk group.

Amongst other, the A11 Initiative advocated changes in the Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination that would expand the types of organizations that could be able to lodge complaints to the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality. Provisions in Art. 35, para. 3 of this Law states that complaints, in the name of persons who suffered from discrimination, can be sent by “organizations dealing with human rights”, while the proposed expansion stipulates the explicit inclusion of trade unions. That way workers will be encouraged to lodge complaints, which would not be the case if proposed amendments regarding the inclusion of the Labour and other inspectorates only would become part of the legal framework, as those would instead discourage workers to fully address discrimination they were facing. The latter is a direct consequence of alleged corruption and inefficiency of inspectors and that is why the proposed change needs to include a full assessment of and intervention in those institutions as they could have necessary capacities to incite workers to report cases of labour rights violations. [28]

More, in its Recommendations for better Protection of Economic and Social Rights During and Immediately after the Crisis Caused by the Pandemic of Coronavirus, which deals with proposals for opening discussions about key issues identified during the first wave of the Covid-19 crisis, the A11 Initiative proposed a set of recommendations aimed at decision-makers, expert bodies and public authorities in proposing and creating measures, CSOs, trade union, activists and others for promoting economic and social rights during the crisis. It includes proposals to improve the process of data collections, mapping needs of the most vulnerable citizens (including Roma, displaced persons, elderly, people with disabilities, children, precarious workers and workers in the informal sector), desegregating data, making it more transparent, to include non-state entities in the decision-making process and improving data exchange. Besides measures on data, the A11 Initiative proposed establishing a “third crisis staff” that would deal with the protection and improvement of the most vulnerable, including independent human rights institutions, CSOs and trade unions in public hearing before adopting decisions and analysing effects on made decisions. The Initiative further states that decision making processes need to be guided by proportionality and a human rights-based approach, that special attention needs to be paid to interdependence of economical and civil and political rights, to analyse bylaws and other decisions from the aspect of the principle of non-discrimination, to harmonize effects of economic measures for economic recovery and to define the minimum obligation of the state below which the exercise of an individual right cannot be lowered even during the state of emergency. More measures were proposed dealing with measures in the field of individual economic and social rights and access to justice and protection of economic and social rights. [29]

[28] “Position of Tradeswomen During the Pandemic of Covid-19”, p. 31-32. Available at: https://www.a11initiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/The-Position-of-Tradeswomen-During-The-Pandemic-of-Covid-19_Spreads_FINAL.pdf

[29] “Recommendations for better Protection of Economic and Social Rights During and Immediately after the Crisis Caused by the Pandemic of Coronavirus”. Available at: https://www.a11initiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/A11-Preporuke_Eng.pdf

Good practices of CSOs

Response to the basic needs of constituencies

Civic Initiatives have conducted a questionnaire sent to CSOs in Serbia about their activities, the needs of the groups they work with, and the services they will provide to citizens in the period of the Covid-19 crisis.

The survey included 92 CSOs from all over Serbia and the answers indicated that only 3 CSOs completely stopped their activities. Third of CSOs were involved in humanitarian work, while fewer than 15 of them continued to carry out their regular activities. When it comes to concerns, CSOs were mostly concerned with education, research and information, psychological support, media work and human rights. Most CSOs said that they needed medical supplies and protective equipment, then materials and finances, needs related to networking and IT equipment. When asked about areas they provided support, a fifth of CSOs answered that they were in the media, information, research and humanitarian aid fields. CSOs planned to address legal aid and human rights, psychological assistance, health care, networking, education and fundraising. When asked about the importance of working with certain groups, they emphasised the importance of working with people with disabilities, women, children and the elderly, as well as migrants and the homeless. The questionnaire also included personal stories of certain CSOs about their engagement during the Covid-19 crisis. [30]

Community mobilisation and other transformative actions

During the Covid-19 crisis, there have been several successful online donation campaigns aimed at creating relief for impacted populations, posted on the “donacije.rs” portal, run by Catalyst Balkans.

The Anti-trafficking Action (ASTRA) launched a campaign called “Let’s Show Former Trafficking Victims that They are not Alone During the Pandemic”, which raised RSD582.551 for trafficking victims. ASTRA stated that the pandemic changed people’s lives overnight and that reports showed that the most poor amongst us were the most vulnerable, due to lack of money and inadequate conditions for housing and a life in dignity. In this group of socio-vulnerable persons, because of psycho-physical consequences of exploitation and social stigma, are also victims of trafficking and their families. [31]

One other successful campaign was directed at securing urgent help for persons in danger due to Covid-19 in Novi Pazar, Tutin and Sjenica, which raised RSD2.537.833 on the “donacije.rs” portal. The campaign stated that data on those infected and those who died because of Covid-19 in Novi Pazar, Tutin and Sjenica, was alarming at the moment before the campaign. It is further explained that hospital capacities were full and that the lack of medical equipment and expert personnel suggested that the increase in numbers of persons in danger of Covid-19 would not be able to be controlled. Moreover, the fear amongst citizens was spread after the city administration announced a call for urgent purchase of medical equipment, including tin coffins and burial sacks. [32]

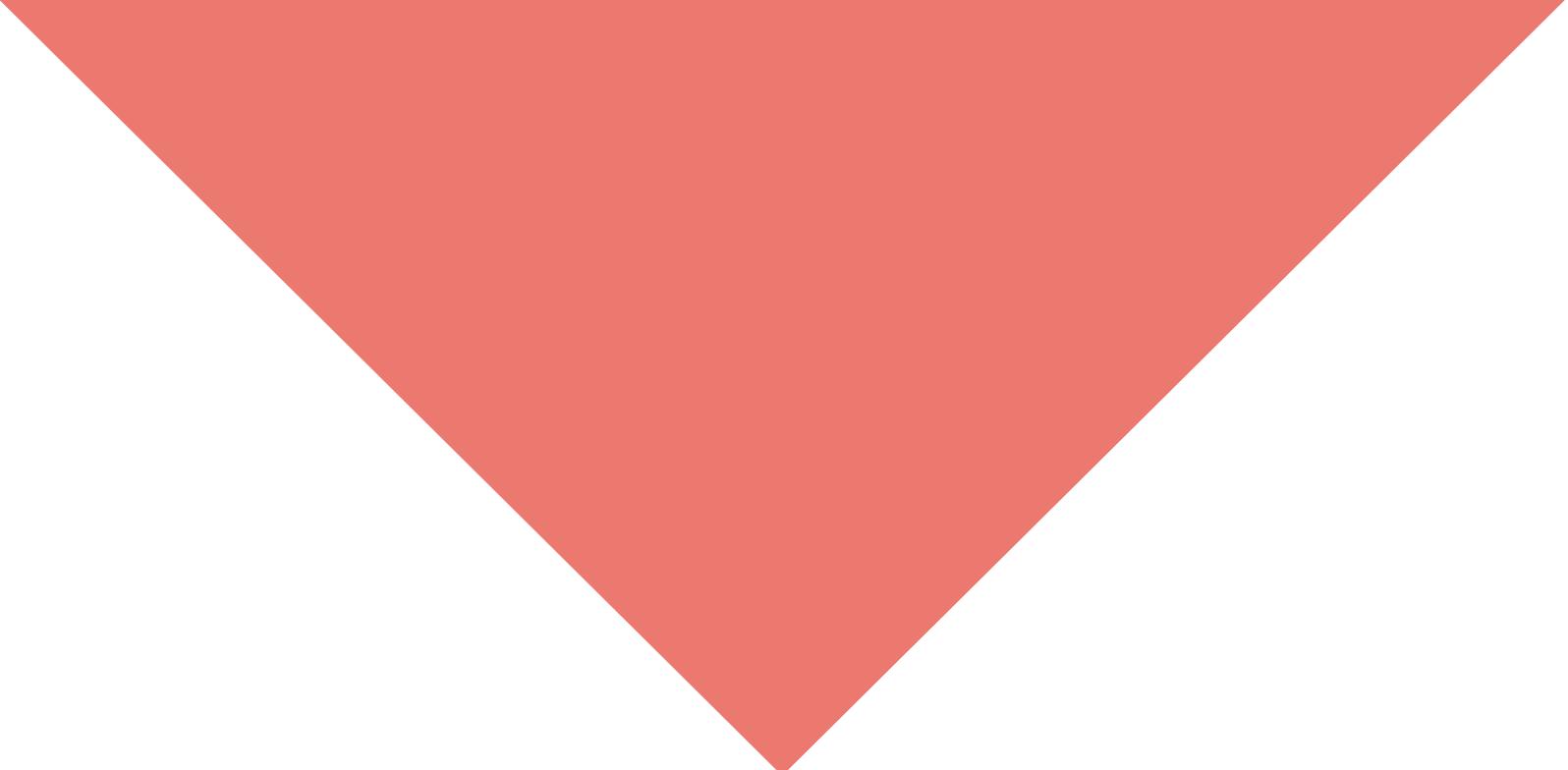
Lastly, a campaign calling for help in fighting the Covid-19 pandemic in hotspots raised RSD639.931. The campaign stated that after a year since the first detected case of Covid-19, the number of infected in the whole world was still alarming and that health personnel were facing the heaviest burden of that fight. It was also stated that health institutions and Covid hospitals had their capacities full and that medical personnel often worked in conditions in which they lacked proper protection and medical equipment, for self-protection and for caring for those who were sick. [33]

[30] “CSO Response Covid-19”. Available at: <https://www.gradjanske.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/CSO-response-to-Covid-19-Needs-and-Activities-Civic-Initiatives-.pdf>

[31] “ASTRA: Pokažimo nekadašnjim žrtvama trgovine ljudima da nisu same tokom pandemije”. Available at: <https://www.donacije.rs/projekat/astra-paketi-pomoci/>

[32] “Obezbedimo urgentnu pomoć ugroženima od Covid-19 u Novom Pazaru, Tutinu i Sjenici”. Available at: <https://www.donacije.rs/projekat/pomoc-novi-pazar-tutin-sjenica/>

[33] “Opšti apel: Pomozimo borbu protiv Covid-19 u žarištima”. Available at: <https://www.donacije.rs/projekat/korona-virus-pomoc/>



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