

CSOs activities related to the COVID-19 response

26 May-1 June

The announcements of the pandemic and the measures taken by the Serbian government to fight against the COVID-19 virus have changed the work of civil society organizations. The monitoring included 144 civil society organizations from all over Serbia. Most CSOs, almost a third, are involved in humanitarian work, while fewer than 15 organizations carry out their regular activities. In addition to humanitarian work, other areas that can be categorized as organizational activities are: monitoring, information, psychosocial support and advocacy. When it comes to individual activities within these areas these are: providing legal assistance, human rights monitoring, providing psychological assistance, dealing with health care, networking, education and fundraising. Slightly less than half of the organizations are active in Belgrade, and other CSOs are located throughout Serbia.

It is particularly important to emphasize the importance of working with the most vulnerable groups, through information on the poor current situation and the possible consequences of the pandemic on the groups concerned such as people with disabilities, women, children and the elderly, as well as migrants and the homeless.

Although the state of emergency in Serbia was lifted on May 6 according to available data the organizations will continue to organize their activities in the way they did in the state of emergency, especially bearing in mind that the consequences of the pandemic will be felt by their users in the coming period.

The following are the activities of some of the organizations that have been implemented in the past period:

MONITORING

-Partners for Democratic Change Serbia, within the project "Citizens have power", made a study on the consequences of misuse of the video surveillance system in the Republic of Serbia entitled "[Video surveillance: a means to improve security or violate the privacy of citizens?](#)". Video surveillance of public areas became topical in early 2019 when representatives of the Ministry of Interior informed the public about the intentions to start the project "Safe City." As announced at the time, the project involves mass processing of personal data of Serbian citizens using video surveillance equipment. The public still does not have reliable information on the number of cameras and the locations where the cameras will be placed, and there is no expert analysis on the justification for the introduction of such a video surveillance system.

Partners for Democratic Change published a study "[The Impact of the Law on Free Legal Aid on the Work of Civil Society Organizations](#)". The focus of this study was to determine whether the newly established system of free legal aid provides adequate access to justice for citizens and how the enactment of the Law affected the work of civil society organizations. Bearing in mind that the Ministry of Justice supervises the implementation of this Law, the study presents some of the concerns and issues of civil society organizations regarding the application of the Law and its provisions, to which the Ministry of Justice should provide further clarifications and interpretations.

- **The National Coalition for Decentralization** issued a [statement](#) regarding the airport in Nis, "Constantine the Great". According to their statement, two years after the confiscation of the Nis airport, none of what was promised and what was the justification for this act of destroying the system of local self-government in Serbia was done. For all these reasons, the National Coalition for Decentralization calls on the leadership of the City of Nis and representatives of the Ministry of Construction and Transport, as well as the Ministry of Defense, to promptly and without delay forgive the city's debt for the confiscated land. The NKD demands that this be done before the elections, on June 21, and thus at least slightly reduce the damage caused by the unjustified and obviously reckless centralization of the airport. Bearing in mind that in the post-election period, institutions will be blocked by the formation of the Government of Serbia and local authorities in Nis, the danger of entering the payment of such high interest, defined by the previous government structure in 2009, could seriously jeopardize the functioning of Nis.

- **Initiative for Economic and Social Rights -A11** launches the platform ["Dojavi"](#) which will provide the possibility of communication between organizations, volunteer groups, donors and individuals who are familiar with the specific problems on the ground faced by various vulnerable groups (residents of informal settlements) and collective centers, the homeless and individual households) so that information on the needs of the vulnerable is exchanged and assistance to those in need is timely.

- **The Sumadija Center for Civic Activism RES Publica** issued a [statement](#) regarding discrimination against the media in Kragujevac. This association states that even after the end of the crisis caused by the corona virus, the Clinical Center Kragujevac, ie the acting director, Predrag Sazdanović, continues with the inadmissible practice of discrimination against the media and journalists. In addition to depriving part of the public of important information in this way, the director damages the reputation of the institution he heads.

-**The Committee of Lawyers for Human Rights YUCOM** has published info graphics ["52 days of state of emergency"](#) which indicate important information regarding the restriction of fundamental rights and freedoms during the state of emergency in the Republic of Serbia. The rules on movement bans have been changed so often that citizens have not always been adequately informed about their obligations. The info graphics on the obligation of self-isolation and curfew show in a simple way what was allowed and what was forbidden, what were the obligations of the citizens and what were the consequences of not respecting them.

- **The Belgrade Center for Human Rights** estimates that the Constitutional Court of Serbia, rejecting - as obviously unfounded - [initiatives](#) to initiate proceedings to assess the constitutionality of the Decision on declaring a state of emergency of March 15, 2020, devalued the role of the National Assembly in the state of emergency. In their statement, they state that by devaluing the role of the parliament, in the stated way, the sovereignty of the citizens, which is realized through the Constitution, is realized, which is realized through their freely elected representatives. The possibility of its usurpation by one MP (only "the first among equals") was not a relevant constitutional issue for the Constitutional Court of Serbia.

-**Belgrade Fund for Political Excellence** together with the Belgrade Center for Security Policy, Center for Contemporary Politics (CSP), Center for European Policies (CEP), Center for International and Security Affairs (ISAC), European Movement in Serbia (EPuS), Committee of Lawyers for Human Rights (YUCOM) of Serbia and the Center for Civil Liberties (CEGAS), the Institute of Alternatives (IA) and the Politikon Network of Montenegro issued a [statement](#) urging authorities to urgently calm tensions between Serbia and Montenegro. As they pointed out, at a time when leading candidates for EU membership are expected to show stronger political leadership and credibility in fulfilling the commitments and values on which the Union is based, calming tensions between Serbia and Montenegro and ending the use of inflammatory and passionate speech in statements of officials of these countries is imperative.

-**Transparency Serbia** presented the results of this year's survey of the [Local Transparency Index \(LTI 2020\)](#). The results show that the transparency of cities and municipalities in Serbia increased in 2020 compared to the previous year, but the average is still low, and the most transparent local governments are Becej, Novi Pazar and Sombor..

-**The Center for Children's Rights**, together with the Network of Children's Organizations of Serbia and Friends of Children of Serbia, [called on political parties](#) not to abuse children for political purposes and thus violate children's rights, because the protection and welfare of children must be a priority of every society. According to the statement, they call on political parties to respect the opinions and attitudes of children and note that there is no reason for their direct involvement in any promotional activities. The difference between quasi-participation and manipulation of children from their actual participation in social life should be defined, where their maturity and age must be taken into account. Therefore, the call for political parties to support the initiative and commit themselves to respecting the Code on the Protection of Children from Political Abuse is open.

- **The Toplicki Center for Democracy** from Prokuplje issued a [statement](#) on the occasion of the Government's refusal to respond to their request to submit information on how many respirators and other medical equipment have been purchased since the beginning of the epidemic and exactly how much was paid. As they said in their statement, the non-delivery of information to the citizens about how the state spent their money during the state of emergency cannot, as they say, be justified by anything, but it can be "easily understood".

- **The Youth Initiative for Human Rights** has launched the website ratusrbiji.rs - a platform that provides all important and relevant information on war crimes and other serious human rights violations on the territory of Serbia in the period from 1991 to 2001. YIHR states that in the period of general glorification of convicted war criminals in Serbia, as well as due to ignorance of crimes on the territory of Serbia, the site ratusrbiji.rs is an attempt to - in the simplest and most comprehensive way - dispel the myth that no war took place in Serbia, as well as that the state of Serbia did not participate in the war disintegration of the second Yugoslavia.

- **The SHARE Foundation** has published the third online [monitoring](#) campaign for the elections scheduled for the end of June, which they are conducting together with the Heinrich Bell Foundation for the period 20-27 May. The data show that the political advertising of the parties on Facebook is increasing, that over 2000 tweets were written on Twitter with the hash tags # izbori2020 and # bojkot2020, while in the area of national online media, the Nova S portal still reports the most on elections.

- **The Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability (CRTA)** continues with daily monitoring of the election campaign in Serbia, on the occasion of the parliamentary and local elections scheduled for June 21. They published an [analysis](#) of REM's election monitoring revealing four key aspects of concern and which could lead to biased results. Four key aspects relate to: the narrow and productive scope of program monitoring, the erroneous comparative approach, the neglect of role and tonality, and the lack of transparency.

INFORMATION

- **The Union of High School Students of Serbia** has launched the first virtual center for student parliaments called [UP Center](#). This space will act as a resource and information center intended to encourage activism and civic participation, as well as to strengthen high school students who are members of parliament to implement their activities as best as possible.

PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT

- **The group IZADI** from Novi Sad is launching the program ["GET OUT WITH A STORY"](#). This is a free two-month program for LGBTI * people aged 15 to 40, who will analyze personal life experiences before and during the # COVID19 pandemic through workshops, receive support for overcoming the challenges that these experiences have brought and create stories based on the basic principles of storytelling methodology.

- **Association Da se zna!** sent an open letter to the Ministry of the Interior, the Asylum Department of the Border Police Administration, with a notice of a recent change in the law in the Republic of Hungary which critically disenfranchises all transgender and intersex people in this country and puts them at high risk of discrimination. Article 33 of the new law deprives transgender and intersex persons of the right to self-determination, endangers the right to privacy, as well as the right to protection against discrimination by introducing new data in the birth register that records "gender at birth" and is transferred to personal documents without subsequent change. Association Da se zna! appealed to all decision-makers in the asylum process in Serbia to take as a mitigating circumstance to all transgender and intersex persons from the Republic of Hungary who apply for this process, given the seriousness of violations of rights in their home country.

-**The Autonomous Women's Center** issued a [press release](#) demanding zero tolerance for violence against women. In the statement they emphasize that four women were killed in Serbia only a few days before and after May 18 - the Day of Remembrance of Women Victims of Violence, which was established precisely to stop this problem. This data points to the fact that violence against women is still ubiquitous in Serbian society, but also to the widespread of tolerance and justification of this problem. It is also stated that it is obvious that there is no clear political will in Serbia to protect women from violence and prevent murders. Despite numerous laws, guidelines, measures and campaigns, there is no clear and unambiguous position of experts and the public that violence against women is inadmissible and punishable.

HUMANITARIAN AID

-**Astra**, together with its associates, the international organizations AMBER Alert Europe, Missing Children Europe and the Global Missing Children Network, marked the International Day of Missing Children, May 25, [actively participating](#) in the international campaigns Football Cares and Don't be An Easy Catch. Both campaigns are aimed at children, young people and their guardians to protect themselves from potential kidnappings and disappearances.

-**The Catalyst Balkans Foundation** has published info graphics showing the ["Charity Response to Covid-19"](#). From the beginning of the crisis until May 12, they processed 1,003 charity actions. Info graphics show that citizens, companies and organizations joined forces to support their communities, and more than 45% of the donated amount was intended for the purchase of medical equipment. They also published data and [info graphics](#) for the entire Western Balkans region.

- **The Serbian Philanthropic Forum**, in cooperation with the European Network of Foundations and Donors - DAFNE, has announced the [FOCUS](#): Philanthropy competition, a competition for photo stories about philanthropy and solidarity. This is an annual European competition for the best photo story, called FOCUS: Philanthropy, in which the Serbian Philanthropic Forum is participating for the first time this year and which is held under the slogan #HoldingTogether.

- **SOS Children's Villages** calls for action: [Protection of children without parental care and children at risk of losing parental care](#), having in mind the Covid-19 virus pandemic and its consequences. The text states that they request that: child protection services and their employees be identified as essential and that they be equipped with resources accordingly; develop social protection services to ensure the well-being of families and ensure their material security; strengthen coordination between community service agencies; double protection, prevention and support to avoid and quickly address the increased risks of abuse, violence and neglect; the progress made in quality alternative care does not jeopardize, but increases support and protection of young people leaving care; children in the protection movement and ensure their access to adequate care on an equal footing with children who are citizens of that country.