

# CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS FROM SOUTHERN SERBIA

COVID-19 RESPONSE

# INTRODUCTION

## Declaring a pandemic and introducing a state of emergency in the Republic of Serbia

Due to the global pandemic caused by the Covid-19 virus and after the Decision on declaring Covid-19 caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus an infectious disease and the Order banning indoor gatherings in the Republic of Serbia, a state of emergency was imposed in Serbia on March 15, 2020. The decision to introduce a state of emergency was made with the co-signature of the President of the Republic, the President of the National Assembly and the Prime Minister, without a formal written explanation. The adoption of this decision also enabled the adoption of measures that prescribe the derogation of certain human and minority rights.

With the introduction of the state of emergency, as well as the declaration of a corona virus pandemic, it had a great impact on the work of civil society organizations. Most of them had to react quickly and adjust their activities to the new situation. Unfortunately, a small number of them had to suspend some of their activities or completely stop working during the state of emergency. In addition to the focus on humanitarian work, other areas in which the activities of organizations can be classified as: monitoring, information, psychosocial support and advocacy.

It is especially important to emphasize the activities of organizations that work with the most vulnerable groups, through information on the poor current situation and possible consequences of the pandemic on the groups they deal with, namely people with disabilities, women, children and the elderly, as well as migrants and the homeless. Although the state of emergency was lifted in Serbia on May 6, most organizations continued to operate in emergency circumstances and continue to focus their work on the needs arising from the declaration of a pandemic.

# INTRODUCTION

## Monitoring of civil society organizations in three municipalities in southern Serbia

The report includes monitoring of civil society organizations in three municipalities in southern Serbia: Bujanovac, Presevo and Vranje. Information is collected in cooperation with local organizations from these three municipalities. Local organizations collect information based on desk research as well as direct contact with other organizations and media in these three municipalities. The information that will be presented in the report refers to general information about the municipality itself, general information about civil society organizations, information about local media, general information related to Covid-19 as well as the response of civil society during the crisis caused by the Covid-19 virus.

These three municipalities are multiethnic communities in southern Serbia, with Albanian, Serb and Roma populations. Since the Albanian national community boycotted the 2011 census, there is no official number of members of the Albanian national minority, but it is estimated that more than 100,000 of them live in southern Serbia. That is why the National Council for the Albanian National Minority is located in Bujanovac.

# PREŠEVO

## About the municipality

Preševo is a municipality of 264 km<sup>2</sup>. It is estimated that Preševo has 29,989 inhabitants (2018). Economically, it belongs to the IV group of development, which is below 60% of the national average. The annual municipal budget for 2020 is EUR 9.3 million. It is estimated that 27,035 Albanians (90%) and 2,294 (7.5%) Serbs live in Preševo. In 2018, 263 people emigrated from the municipality, and 226 immigrated, which is a negative balance of 37 people. There is a reception center for migrants in Preševo, which was reopened in 2019. Here, migrants are in transit and can get temporary accommodation, food and water, medical and any other help. They can also get a certificate of intent for asylum with which they have the right to go to the assigned center in the next 72 hours. The capacity of the Center is about 1,000 people. The average salary in Preševo is 38,280 RSD.

## Civil society organisations

According to the data of the Agency for Business Registers, in 2018 there were 77 active associations and 1 foundation in Preševo, with 31 employees. The total operating income of the organizations in Preševo was 51,770,000 RSD, which is 437,721 EUR. Most associations are fictitious and can be characterized as GONGO associations that do not have a clearly defined field of activity. The most common topics addressed by civil society organizations are human rights, tolerance, culture, health, gender equality and religion. The primary obstacles to the work of organizations are reflected in the lack of financial resources, as well as in the difficulties in applying for state funds, because a large number of people in Preševo do not speak Serbian.

# PREŠEVO

Government policies at the national and local level prevent or hinder the development of civic activism through various mechanisms, while citizens are of the opinion, as in the whole of Serbia, that civil society is a threat, not a partner. Discrimination by the state is present, as well as repression through the judicial and police system, which all contributes to the deterioration of the socio-economic situation, which thus reflects on the passivity of civic activism. There is also the problem of politicization of organizations as well as the establishment of organizations for the use of state funds. Cooperation between organizations and local self-government exists, but this cooperation is often limited mainly to the financing of organizations through local self-government competitions. What organizations in Preševo lack is the strengthening and greater involvement of local organizations in cooperation and networking with larger organizations, as well as greater motivation and encouragement of civic activism. Adjusting donor policy for multicultural communities and small communities would also contribute to the development of civil society in this municipality.

## Local media

On the territory of the municipality of Preševo, 9 media (traditional and electronic) are registered through which the population of this municipality is informed. During the state of emergency in Serbia, local media mostly carried news and important information from the regular conference of the RS Crisis Staff and the Municipal Staff. At one point, Preševo had the largest number of self-isolated citizens as a result of the fact that a large number of citizens stayed in Kosovo and Macedonia before the state of emergency was declared. It was impossible to get information on the number of tested citizens in Preševo, and the Crisis Staff of the RS Government did not have information on the number of tested citizens in this municipality.

# PREŠEVO

At the beginning of May, the Ministry of Culture and Information announced the results of several competitions for financing and co-financing projects in the field of culture and information, where no media or association from Preševo received money. Also, due to the situation caused by the virus, the Ministry of Finance has made a decision to reduce the budget for local governments, including these three municipalities, which is perceived among the citizens of these municipalities as a form of discrimination.

## COVID-19

Declaring a state of emergency in Serbia and a pandemic of the Covid-19 virus, Preševo was found without infected people. As of the end of May, the number of positive for the Covid-19 virus is 6, which represents 0.05% of the total number of infected in Serbia.[1]

## CSO response to COVID-19

A small number of associations and informal groups immediately after the declaration of the state of emergency started working on collecting humanitarian aid for families in poor economic situation. The Presevo Red Cross, the Presevo municipality through its humanitarian fund, the OSCE office in Bujanovac, the Albanian charity "Jetimat e Ballkanit" from Kosovo and several other informal groups from Presevo organized and delivered food and hygiene packages to the most vulnerable families. In mid-March, the association "Vision for Development and Improvement", with the support of the Turkish TIKa, initiated the production of protective masks, which they distributed to citizens in Presevo and Bujanovac.

[1] <https://covid19.rs/>

# PREŠEVO

In early April, the Organization for Development and Democracy Bujanovac formed an expert team that provided free advice, consultations and assistance to small and medium enterprises from Bujanovac and Presevo, on tax relief and financial assistance to reduce the economic consequences of Covid-19 virus in these two municipalities.[2]

# BUJANOVAC

## About the municipality

Bujanovac is a municipality with an area of 461 km<sup>2</sup>. It is estimated that Bujanovac has 37,735 inhabitants (2018). Economically, it belongs to the IV group of development, which is below 60% of the national average. The annual municipal budget for 2020 is 9 million EUR. The latest valid data date from June 2015, when the International Community and the Republic Statistical Office estimated the population and according to them, 20,735 Albanians (55%) and 12,989 Serbs (34%) (and 11% Roma) live in Bujanovac. In 2018, 336 people emigrated from the municipality, and 251 immigrated, which is a negative balance of 85. About 250 migrants are staying at the Reception Center in Bujanovac. The average net income was 38,286 RSD.

# BUJANOVAC

## Civil society organisations

According to the data of the Business Registers Agency, in 2018, there were 149 active associations in Bujanovac with 69 employees and no foundation or endowment. The total operating income of organizations in Bujanovac was 100,484,000 RSD, which is 849,604 EUR. Given that the municipality of Bujanovac is a multiethnic community, the most common topics addressed by civil society organizations are human rights and democracy, with a focus on the rights of national minorities (especially on improving the status of Roma and Albanians), minority integration and multiculturalism. Also, economic and social rights are among the most represented topics, ie. economic empowerment of certain vulnerable groups as well as environmental protection. Most are project-oriented, but most do not have a clearly defined area of action and development strategy. The main obstacles to the development of civil society in this municipality are the lack of interest of citizens in civic activism, lack of awareness of the possibilities of influencing change, as the division of society that affects the lack of common goals of citizens in the local environment. There is also a lack of development and lack of capacity of organizations, but also insufficient donor support and lack of financial resources. A large number of organizations are close to the authorities and were established with the aim of obtaining financial resources at local self-government competitions. Also, some of the previously active civil society organizations have grown over time into political organizations. In most cases, organizations implement projects in partnership with organizations from Belgrade, Novi Sad, Novi Pazar because they do not have the capacity to independently implement projects. What organizations need is capacity building and networking of organizations at the local level, as well as providing funding for longer-term projects and activities.



# BUJANOVAC

## Local media

24 media are registered on the territory of the municipality of Bujanovac. The media in this municipality also face a difficult situation, as do most media in Serbia, especially local ones. In recent years, there have been cases of attacks and pressure from local authorities, but also irregularities when it comes to local competitions for co-financing media content.

## COVID-19

In Bujanovac, the number of positive citizens for the Covid-19 virus is 16, which represents 0.14% of the total positive in Serbia.[3] The largest number of cases in this municipality occurred in mid-May, after the lifting of the state of emergency and the easing of measures that were in force in order to combat the pandemic.

## CSO response to COVID-19

During the state of emergency and the Covid-19 pandemic, the Organization for Development and Democracy Bujanovac carried out a series of activities (procurement of equipment for the Bujanovac Health Center, volunteer actions in cooperation with the Bujanovac Red Cross and the Bujanovac Municipal Headquarters, free legal aid in Albanian and Serbian for citizens of the municipalities of Bujanovac, Preševo and Medveđa). They also planned to implement activities that include assistance to businessmen and farmers, especially when filling out forms for financial relief, psycho-social assistance to marginalized populations (members of national minorities, unemployed, single mothers, etc.), as well as monitoring compliance of human rights and freedoms during the state of emergency as well as the period after the state of emergency.

[3] <https://covid19.rs/>

# BUJANOVAC

The Roma Center for Democracy provided assistance in the form of speech therapy treatments for children with developmental disabilities, autism and perverted disorders. They need financial resources to provide the most vulnerable families with protective equipment, hygiene products as well as packages of food. That is why they want to launch a campaign to raise funds through the donation.rs platform.[4]

# VRANJE

## About the municipality

Vranje is a municipality with an area of 860 km<sup>2</sup>. It is estimated that Vranje has 80,402 inhabitants (2018). Economically, it belongs to the II development group (80% -100% of the national average). The annual municipal budget for 2020 is 23.5 million EUR. According to the 2011 census, 91.7% of Serbs and 5.6% of Roma and 0.7% of Bulgarians live in Vranje. There is a very small share of the Albanian minority (0.02%). In 2018, 842 people emigrated from the municipality, and 565 immigrated, which is a negative balance of 277 people. In May 2017, an additional reception center was opened in Vranje (220 seats), which is located in a motel at the entrance to the city. The average net income was 42,130 RSD.

# VRANJE

## Civil society organisations

In 2018, there were 332 active associations and 3 active foundations in Vranje, with 127 employees. The total operating income of organizations in Vranje was 308,170,000 RSD, which is 2,605,613 EUR. The focus of their work is similar to that in the above-mentioned municipalities, mainly on human rights, economic and social rights of vulnerable groups as well as representatives of minority communities. Obstacles most often encountered by organizations in Vranje relate to the lack of interest of local government representatives in cooperating with organizations, as well as poor communication. Also, there is a lack of motivation and interest of citizens, especially young people for volunteer work and civic activism, but also a lack of capacity of organizations to connect with citizens.

Citizens are insufficiently informed about the possibilities of creating informal associations, movements and citizens' associations. Most of the organizations were recently established and are close to the authorities, so they can be characterized as GONGO organizations. Only a few organizations implement projects and activities, in cooperation with domestic and international donors, which are in the interest of citizens. Local authorities cooperate only with organizations that carry out activities in their interest, and this is especially evident in the last few years, when there has been a noticeable increase in the number of newly established associations. It is essential that donors recognize the importance of organizations working in local communities and thus support and encourage activism in local communities.

# VRANJE

## Local media

When it comes to informing the population during a state of emergency, the situation was worrying. This situation in the local media in Vranje was noticeable even before the corona virus pandemic. 27 media (6 televisions, 7 radio stations, 12 portals and 2 productions) are registered on the territory of Vranje. Most media outlets are close to the governing structure, and a small number of independent media outlets face a difficult financial situation as well as difficult access to information. As a reminder, in September 2017, the local weekly Novine Vranjske was closed down, after 23 years of existence and more than 1,000 printed issues, due to political and economic pressures from local authorities. Weekly Vranjske was one of the most important local weeklies with a long tradition of performing professional and independent journalistic work. After the editor-in-chief of this weekly went on a hunger strike, the Group for Freedom of the Media was established and protests were held in front of the Government of Serbia.[5]

In Vranje, one of the three cases of arresting journalists during the state of emergency was recorded Journalist of the Info portal. Vranjske was brought in for questioning, presumably after his text about illegal actions of the President of the Municipality of Trgoviste.[6]

[5] <https://www.glasamerike.net/a/ugasene-vranjske/4037384.html>

[6] More information: <https://www.gradjanske.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Tri-slobode-pod-lupom-31.mart-02.-april.pdf>

# VRANJE

## COVID-19

·In Vranje as of the end of May, the number of infected is 307, which represents 2.7% of the total number of infected in Serbia. [7] Vranje is in the fourth place in terms of the number of infected according to the cities in Serbia. This municipality has been a hotbed of infection on several occasions since the beginning of the pandemic, and at one point it was in second place in terms of the number of infected, right after Belgrade. After the lifting of the state of emergency, Vranje became a hotbed again due to the irresponsible behavior of employers of several private companies in that city.

## CSO response to COVID-19

A number of organizations in Vranje became active at the beginning of the declaration of the state of emergency and adjusted their activities to the current situation and needs. The "SPA" association, together with its volunteers, organized help for the most endangered population, especially in rural areas. They also provided psycho-social support to women and children. With the above-mentioned activities, the Roma Center for Democracy also operated on the territory of Vranje. Help - Hilfe zur Selbsthilfe e.V provided funds to help the most vulnerable communities. The OPRE ROMA SERBIA Association worked on organizing aid for the most vulnerable Roma settlement.[8]

[7] <https://covid19.rs/>

[8] Map of activities and needs of civil society organizations during the Covid-19 virus pandemic <https://rc.gradjanske.org/>

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